

Extraordinary Undercurrents:
Australian Cinema, Genre and the Everyday

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by
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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

David Thomas

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Acknowledgements

It seems that most of the colleagues and friends I have made at Murdoch University are in agreement: despite the best intentions, completing a project like this involves continuously unpredictable cycles of productivity, frustration, successes, and failures. It has occurred to me, on occasion during the less enjoyable of these cycles, that any material of genuine worth appearing within the following pages must either be pure luck, or the result of the input of a wiser person. With that in mind, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Garry Gillard, for his *extraordinary* patience, expertise, and personal and professional support during my candidacy. Our lengthy and rewarding association has not been solely about the production of a dissertation however, and thanks are also due to Garry for his guidance in relation to my endeavours with teaching, and writing for publication.

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Abstract

‘Extraordinary Undercurrents: Australian Cinema, Genre and the Everyday’

investigates how the critical uptake of genre-based cinema has been incorporated into the cultural and industrial rubric of Australian national cinema. The thesis offers, in part, a revaluation of theoretically under-emphasized texts (as well as texts that have been the subject of much higher levels of scrutiny), in order to establish recurrent threads within Australian cinema. In doing this, the thesis offers new and original knowledge in the form of developing a perspective for a revised critical and theoretical analysis of genre cinema within Australian cinema, challenging the presumption of the kinds of texts that can be seen as articulating the nation. The groups of films examined herein form nodes through which a network of important and divergent ideas about nation, national identity and social organization come together in the form of narrative and thematic undercurrents.

These (generally malevolent) undercurrents are articulated in the filmic representation of a range of conventional personal, social and cultural dichotomies, and of particular interest are the events, characters and narratives in which the everyday is confronted by the abstract, abject and uncanny. The undercurrents I identify are shown as the textual sites in which transgression - both inside and outside the frame - and intertextuality are collocated, representing the convergence of material which simultaneously operates outside of genres, while reinforcing textual similarity. The undercurrents I identify provide a theoretical direction in analysing interaction between national cinema, culture and identity.

Introduction



The Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2005)

Alas, I came to this beleaguered land, and the God in me evaporated. So let us change our toast, sir, to the God who has forgotten us.

Jellon Lamb, *The Proposition*

For some time, I have harboured the flawed belief that Australian cinema is generally dystopian. It has been pointed out to me, convincingly, that this is not the case, and would be an argument I would inevitably fail to successfully support. Nonetheless, I have never been able to *totally* rid myself of this admittedly nebulous idea. To put it in a slightly different, and even more opaque manner, I cannot seem to shake the feeling that in the chaotic multitude of voices pouring out of Australian film narratives, there is a quiet but consistent presence beneath the all the noise, and it is telling me that things are *not* going to be alright.

Accordingly, this thesis examines aspects of cinema that inform us - as critics, writers, cinema fans, and Australians - that the boundaries and categories into which we place much of our conceptual faith are neither immutable nor consistent. I engage with a wide range of films, emphasizing cultural and theoretical perspectives that lend themselves to a discussion of the problematic distinction between the social and cultural environment within which we go about our everyday lives, and the assumptions on which we base that life. I have interrogated five loosely formed groups of films that engage with, respectively, myths of Australian identity, social formations relating to location, the transgression of textual and cultural boundaries, cultural implications of speculative fiction, and ambiguities in relation to moral conventions.

This project contains two main aims, which are, I suggest, inextricably bound together. Primarily, it is an examination of undercurrents, family resemblances,

threads of similarity and shared cultural experiences that are found within Australian narratives, but that are not necessarily dependent on genre as a categorical distinction. Undercurrents are the links between elements of films that function in the mediated spaces between screen and viewer, and between narrative and culture. They are the usefully ambiguous intersections of style, theme and form that operate through implication and suggestion, rather than through explicit definition, and representation. Undercurrents are analysed in relation to the networks of cultural discourses they access, in order to demonstrate the implications they generate for analysis of Australian cinema. The reason for this trajectory resides partially in my opening comments, but mainly in a desire to form a schema through which serious social and political analysis can be performed into texts that might not ordinarily be deemed to warrant such attention. I seek a position that, through the identification of narrative and thematic undercurrents, is both inclusive and highly focussed.

Alongside this investigation is an attempt to enliven discussion of the genre film within the context of a national cinema. Without wanting to venture into high art/low art discussions at this point, this aim can be expressed as a desire to tackle the tension that exists between films that generate and perpetuate, deliberately and self-consciously, ideas about Australia, and films that do not perform this national service quite so directly. Tom O'Regan has articulated this distinction in another light, as "a film milieu that structurally co-associates the publicly funded with quality and independence and the privately funded with commercial and genre-dependence."¹ This is an undesirable position, one that Carol Laseur sees as reinforcing distinctions

¹ Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 158. Cited in Carol Laseur, "Seeing Film: Reading Contemporary Film Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Murdoch University, 1998), 64

between art and entertainment.² In a nationalistic climate of competition over funding and relevance, I would suggest that this is an apposite time to address such tension as is evident in this distinction. Therefore, I have examined many of the films herein with the explicit intention of highlighting the national within the generic. This is a pattern, or aspect of narrative that has not gone unnoticed in the popular press. In the words of Jim Schembri, “*Wolf Creek* is a sterling example of how the principles of genre film-making can be mediated through local character [...] It’s solid proof that genre, when used skilfully, can enhance rather than obliterate a film’s cultural fingerprint.”³

While implicating and interacting with the discursive practices of social, cultural, and historical organization, it is important to note that this dissertation functions largely as a textual analysis of film, using the backdrop of Australia as its (very broad) context. I have not performed in-depth historical or socio-cultural examinations of the basis of film production as my intent has been to ‘read’ the national within the text, rather than reading film explicitly or solely within the social and industrial context. These trajectories are closely linked, but they are not identical, particularly for genre films, which at first glance do not appear to overtly, or directly implicate the ‘nation’.

Generic cinema productions occupy a difficult space in the milieu of a national cinema. Forced to compete economically with Hollywood genre films, and culturally with local films, these texts are often disadvantaged, as the tension between meeting the financial goals production companies and investors require, and simultaneously meeting the cultural standards of a national cinema, is considerable. This has two

² Laseur, 64.

³ Jim Schembri, “Wolf Creek,” *Film Reviews* *theage.com.au* November 2005 (19 March 2006). <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/film-reviews/wolf-creek/2005/11/03/1130823331626.html>>

clear but contradictory results. Firstly, popular criticism is often accompanied with a financial disclaimer (any quality in the film is unable to be considered without thought of the budget), and secondly, expectations seem to be set unrealistically high. The often expressed desire for exceptional intellectual and cultural standards from all local films leaves contemporary Australian genre films unnecessarily in the shadows of seminal films from around the world. Dave Hoskins demonstrates this in his uptake of Martin Murphy's *Lost Things* (2004), unfavourably (and entirely unfairly, I would suggest) comparing the film to *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) on the one hand and *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968) on the other.⁴

In discussing the genre film, it must be noted that I am very much aware of the theoretical complications of genre. An almost invariable inclusion in writing about a film genre is some kind of disclaimer about how amorphous, unsteady, and ultimately indefinable the genre in question is. This allusion to the problem of genre itself features as a contextualizing presence into many works that study films, like this one, to which no singular category can be justifiably applied without reasonable doubts and concerns. This kind of disclaiming preface works against its own attempt to justify the perspective of inclusiveness; it suggests the liminality of all texts, while simultaneously demonstrating the captivity of those in question. There is no easy answer to this problem in a thesis that is not *about* genre, as opposed to genres. The groups of films I have chosen to examine in this thesis are constituted as groups by their proximity to each other within these pages, as much as through any sense of belonging to a genre in the real world of cultural consumption. The apparently irreconcilable theoretical difference between genre and genres - between theoretical

⁴ Dave Hoskin, "Off the Beaten Track: *Lost Things*." *Metro* 143 (2004):12-15.

difficulty and institutional reality - is pragmatically overcome in scholarly works that examine film genres, by developing schema for belonging that substantiate the specifics of the very genre under examination. This problematic issue of genre is not something I have avoided, however, as I have followed the arguments and advice of many different theorists in order to help conceptualize and encapsulate the genres herein in ways that afford texts a continuously unstable, temporally contextual, and adaptable presence within generic conventions, while acknowledging the pragmatic importance of those conventions. Indeed my own work here demonstrates in part the conclusions reached by many previous examinations of genres; that it is in the indefinite 'edges' of genres - the networks and nodes of cultural intertexts - that meaningful analysis finds social relevance and fecundity. The resemblances and undercurrents I identify throughout this thesis function alongside genre as an expression of the local in Australian genre films. Undercurrents are not separate from genre, yet are not bound tightly to the dictates of generic classification.

As a further disclaimer, it may seem odd that some films are used in a chapter when they might appear more suited to others, or indeed that some categories have included, or excluded films at all. *Wake In Fright* (Ted Kotcheff, 1971), for example, could certainly be justified as an inclusion in the chapter relating to horror films, but my decision to include it in relation to myths of Australian male identity is based on what I have discerned as its most appropriate deployment in relation to my overall argument. There are several other decisions that are based on similar aims. *The Boys* (Rowan Woods, 1998) has been analysed from the perspective of unravelling concerns in the so-called social issues films, yet would be equally valid as an inclusion in the section relating to narratives of crime. Despite these tensions, it

should be noted that the selection of films in each section has been consistently at the forefront of my deliberations, and is illustrative of the very tension generated by the problems of any study of genre.

In the main I have relied on the methodologies of cultural and media studies in relation to film as popular culture, which will of course intimate the discourses and critical vocabularies of literature, psychoanalysis and philosophy. The main analytical frameworks are drawn from writers of Australian cultural studies and Australian cinema, including John Hartley, John Fiske, Graeme Turner, Tom O'Regan, Jonathan Rayner, and others. The necessity of gathering a rather ill-fitting selection of films together, however, has meant that I have augmented these existing perspectives with theoretical positions to which they might not ordinarily be associated, such as those relating to the horror film offered by Noël Carroll, Andrew Tudor and Mark Jancovich. The aim is not to develop a new way of seeing or interpreting film, yet equally it is not to be totally content with the existing frameworks. Rather, in accessing the critical paradigms mentioned, the thesis attempts to forge a position within Australian studies of film and popular culture that is both theoretically proven yet extends itself into new territory.

I have attempted to keep the relationship between cinema and culture centrally focussed throughout this dissertation, using notions of intertextuality, transgression and discursive intersections, despite the difficulties in encapsulating the links between text and cultural 'meanings'. I have been mindful of the theoretical space that exists between culture, text, and individuals as subjects, though this dissertation is not explicitly concerned with the philosophical underpinnings of those concerns. My

trajectory has not been to examine the cultural networks of information exchange between text and individuals, but rather to engage with the traffic within those networks, the systems of signs and artifacts. I have engaged with largely generic fictional texts in the context of a system that is, generally speaking, resistant to such. Drawbacks of the theoretical method I have adopted are primarily associated with the study of genres of cinema. As mentioned above, theoretical engagement with genre is an inextricable part of studying film, and offers both challenges and opportunities. In this case, the theoretical problems of genre itself are subordinate to the consideration specific genres of film. A follow-on problem from this broad issue comes in the form of the way I have grouped films together. However, as I have indicated, the groups of films I have put together are gathered thus in order to demonstrate the links between films that articulate a particular kind of undercurrent, while respecting, if not adhering to, conventional generic formulations.

This is a dissertation that makes observations and claims about the relationship between culture and the individual, and about the relationship and flow of information between the viewer and the screen. As a work of film criticism and analysis, however, it exists within the very same cultural framework that surrounds, produces and perpetuates individual identities, cultural formations, and cinema texts. I have attempted, wherever possible, to emphasize the importance of intertextuality, of the nodes and networks of intersecting discourses that cut across the production and reception of cinema texts. This thesis is part of a body of work that exists within one such node, that of academic criticism, informing, and being informed by another; Australian cinema.

To maintain as much consistency as possible while tackling such a disparate subject matter, Chapter One commences with a timeline of sorts, a collection of ideas about some of the key ‘turning points’ in the history of horror cinema, as a model case study to help illustrate the functionality of cinema as a cultural product. Horror has been linked, popularly and critically, to periods of social upheaval, and the chapter illustrates cycles of film-making that have been implicated through these links, in order to contextualize and formulate a method of understanding the relationship between a cinematic text and its originating culture. This is augmented by an account of ideas relating to intertextuality, transgression and genre. The subsequent five chapters concerned with specific groups of films are placed within the context of the relationship between cinema and culture that is provided in the first chapter.

Chapter Two accesses one of the most enduring myths in Australian cultural circulation – that of the Australian rural male – in order to pose questions about nation and identity, and their seemingly inextricable presence in representations of landscape. Artistic and literary antecedents to cinema are invoked in unpacking some of the constituents and causes of this myth, and in turn revealing the misogynistic, violent and racist undercurrents throughout narratives using, and of course subverting, the myth of the Australian type. Chapter Three functions in a similar manner, but the focus moves from the rural to the urban and suburban environment, as texts articulating the social experience are placed under scrutiny. Often referred to as social issues films, the texts in question here operate in relation to their setting as both an ideological and physical location in a comparable way to those set in rural Australia. Of particular note in this section are issues relating to socially formulated ideas concerning domesticity and gender.

In Chapter Four the horror genre - and perhaps the most coherent grouping of films in this thesis - is investigated. Horror is posited in this section as a cultural site that powerfully creates and disrupts conventional dichotomies. The theoretical framework of psychoanalysis is mobilized through ideas about Kristeva's abject and Freud's uncanny, and the vocabulary of the postmodern is brought to prominence. Much of this theory is carried over into Chapter Five, as both horror and science fiction are identified as articulating undercurrents of paranoia and uncertainty, particularly towards social systems that fail to generate any sense of reliability or benevolent order. Chapter Five also introduces the deployment of Todorov's fantastic as a narrative technique, while highlighting the sense of futility within the social framework experienced by characters across a range of very different films.

Chapter Six undertakes an examination of the narrative representation of crime, moving through theoretical perspectives on moral conventions, criminal characterization in film, and the ambivalence and ambiguity present in cinematic representations of crime in Australia. Crime has been a consistent and very well developed presence in Australian cinema, in stark contrast to science fiction, and even (although to a lesser degree) horror. The relationships between texts in this section are, as a result, quite clear, and offer a strong thread of resemblance that is viewed as an undercurrent of reluctance to submit to socially defined moral conventions.

Chapter Seven consolidates the preceding textual analysis into a theoretical map of undercurrents in Australian cinema. In this section I have posed questions about the critical uptake of genre films. I interrogate the tension that exists between national and

generic forms, and argue for the importance of Australian genres, and narrative undercurrents, in any future critical vocabulary of Australian cinema. I conclude Chapter Seven, and the project as a whole, by suggesting that undercurrents in Australian cinema represent the cultural instrumentality of localized generic productions.⁵

Before commencing the first chapter, I'll allow Stephen King to offer some wisdom (cited by Bernice Murphy):

We were fertile ground for the seeds of terror, we war babies; we had been raised in a strange circus atmosphere of paranoia, patriotism and national hubris. We were told that we were the greatest nation on earth [...] but we were also told exactly what to keep in our fallout shelters and how long we would have to stay there after we won the war.⁶

This passage, despite not being about film, or books, or Australia for that matter, has remained invariably relevant to me for some time now, as a reminder of the power of communications media, and the way people are situated by, and situate the media in their lives. Cinema is an instrument of communication whose narratives circulate throughout cultural discourses as blood flows around the body. King's passage reminds me that this is something I should never underestimate.

⁵ 'Cultural instrumentality' is a phrase proposed by Annette Kuhn. She suggests a distinction between what genre is, and what it does, and the phrase refers to the latter. See Annette Kuhn, "Cultural Theory and Science Fiction Cinema", Introduction to *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 2.

⁶ Bernice Murphy, "Stephen King," *The Literary Encyclopedia* (25 April 2006).
<<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=2509>>

Chapter One - Cinema, Culture and Transgression



Day of the Dead (George Romero, 1985)

Films in general, and horror films in particular, reside in that border zone between the intangibility of narrative and the concreteness of everyday life.¹

The aim of this chapter is not in any way to propose a new way of understanding films, but rather to gather perspectives that allow the interplay between film and viewer to be both a fertile site of theoretical investigation and meaning making, and a pragmatic process involving industrial, social and cultural concerns that take place within a network of very real daily lives. I want to discuss and demonstrate, broadly, the way in which cinema offers an opportunity to challenge socially and politically circumscribed signs and systems of meaning in popular culture, and how we come to an understanding of the relationship between cinema and culture in order to pose questions about the culture out of which these ‘popular’ artifacts and ideas arise. Accordingly, the potential problems involved in presuming an unmediated causal link between a culture and its cinematic output are investigated, along with some theories of film analysis that present opportunities for pragmatic, yet theoretically rigorous and appropriate interpretation of films.

To illustrate some of the theoretical problems and opportunities encountered in film analysis, and to help create a methodology for the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will engage with a selection of theory and criticism relating to horror films. I have chosen to deploy theories of horror to underpin this chapter (and indeed much of this project) for two reasons. Firstly, horror is a genre of production that has generated a great deal of interpretation and analysis that relies heavily on relationships between culture and artifact. Secondly, the texts I am primarily interested in engaging with

¹ Louise Krasniewicz, “Cinematic Gifts: The Moral and Social Exchange of Bodies in Horror Films,” in *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, eds. Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 31.

lend themselves to the sort of scrutiny horror theory offers, and it is my contention that this approach will offer important insights into certain facets of Australian Cinema. This chapter, consequently, seeks to demonstrate the way that the relationship between culture and artifact can be understood as being a series of spaces occurring between poles; the space between viewer and screen, the space between text and culture, for example.

It is in the discursive practices surrounding genre films that the point of origin and the destination for this project are both located. Much ground will be covered tracing this arc, but that it should start and finish at the same point is quite deliberate. Aside from being a source of personal enjoyment, horror films strike me as a curious cultural product, situated as they are on the periphery of 'serious' socio-cultural commentary. Anecdotally at least, the popular uptake of horror cinema has been widely divided. Films of this genre display a tendency to separate audiences (academic and otherwise) between the poles of disdain and fanaticism, often resulting in criticism involving moral questions as well as aesthetic and formal concerns. George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), a film in which the setting is a large shopping complex, is an exemplar of the kind of text that generates these differing critical responses. To some, the film is an insightful and scathing attack on the shallow disposition of a mindless consumer culture, while others see it as a juvenile and morally questionable celebration of extreme violence and hedonism. This is a basic art/commodity split that echoes much debate about distinctions between high and low 'art' or 'culture', and of course this kind of response to films of many kinds is not unique (although clearly some texts generate far more discussion than others). Nonetheless, horror films are routinely subject to criticisms resulting from this high and low art distinction, in

addition to any specific criticisms that are levelled at them in relation to narrative or stylistic concerns. The label of horror is able to make people cringe as few other generic designations can, conjuring innumerable examples of cheap props, cheaper special effects, clichéd stories, terrible acting, and, often, a potentially indefensible amount of predominantly female nudity. Essentially, horror is popularly synonymous with cheap exploitation. It is no surprise, then, that I have frequently been asked by colleagues and friends exactly why they should take horror films seriously, in the light of their apparent status as cultural trash. I gave up defending my interest in these films on a personal level long before I came to be anywhere near a university film course. As Noël Carroll attests, the problems inherent in evaluating film makes discussing preferences particularly difficult.² Fortunately though, in spite of the caution that critics, cinema-goers, colleagues and even legislators can generate towards films like *Dawn of the Dead*, horror cinema has a lengthy and involved history of academic commentary and criticism, and this history has established complex perspectives on the creative, cultural and social implications of this genre of film-making.

A Brief History of Horror and its Social Dimensions

Horror theory reanimates a broad cross section of ideas and critical perspectives, and, I will imply throughout this project, is an area that can offer significant usefulness in relation to Australian Cinema. Established theories resulting from investigations into the historical, thematic, narrative and stylistic elements of the horror film provide us with a set of critical tools that can be applied to uncover more about malevolent, discordant and generally sinister undercurrents in Australian cinema. The primary

² Noël Carroll, "Introducing Film Evaluation", in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 265-278.

task of this chapter is to start formulating and recognizing an analytical vocabulary (and by association, a methodology) for the application of horror theory to Australian Cinema, to which the theoretical components of the remainder of the project will add. Accordingly, this chapter explores some prominent theories concerning the horror film, and portions of associated critical discourses, before delving into some more general problems of film evaluation and analysis. To help establish the strong relationship between horror films and cultural, social and industrial contexts that so many theorists rely on, it is pertinent to begin by outlining the horror film's historical timeline, and demonstrating the expansion and mutation of this form.

While perhaps not exactly 'horror' as we understand it now, during the infancy of cinema, the work of Georges Méliès and the subsequent productions of F.W. Murnau, Fritz Lang and others (the period of German Expressionism) tended significantly towards a highly stylized and introspective anti-realism.³ These films displayed a markedly different visual strategy to other productions, and like other genres of cinema around the turn of the century, much of the content of films in this style arose directly out of literary and theatrical antecedents. During the 1930s, films including *Frankenstein* (Whale 1931) and *Dracula* (Browning 1931) emerged from Universal Studios, and the narratives continued a trend of locating subject material far from the everyday experience of the viewer, either temporally or geographically. The highly stylized mise-en-scene had been toned down somewhat, but the narratives were decidedly fantastic in nature. The productions of the 1940s, however, started to counterbalance this situation, and the physical and metaphorical location of horror narratives moved towards the mundane. Mark Jancovich notes that during this period

³ Mark Jancovich, "Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinctions in the Mediation of The Silence of the Lambs" in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. M. Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 140.

“horror erupts within the normal.”⁴ The RKO films produced by Val Lewton (including *I Walked with a Zombie* (Tourneur 1943) and *The Body Snatcher* (Wise 1945)) are regarded as primary instigators of this change. The late 1950s mark another swing in subject, in the form of traditional Gothic and supernatural horror motifs, particularly in the films produced by Hammer Studios in the UK. The oscillation in narrative focus slowed somewhat in the 1960s. Attention shifted away from the explicitly supernatural and fantastic subject matter, towards the uncanny foe, positioning the narrative ‘threat’ firmly in the familiarity of the everyday. *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960) was situated in the domestic realm, invoking and infringing on the comfort zone of family, and it paved the way for a phase of new texts of this kind. This period of production created monsters whose characteristic attribute was their very familiarity, rather than simply relocating the monstrous vampire or werewolf into a familiar setting.

Andrew Tudor has offered an empirical account of the horror film that statistically dissects the shifts in production styles and trends in detail.⁵ He sets out to establish some skeletal formations around which to construct a history of the horror genre, based on both production periods and the narrative elements of films produced from 1913 to 1984. He details the important changes in horror production that occurred in the 1960s, and isolates the ‘threat’ as the very centre of the horror narrative, differentiating between types in order to construct his analysis. Tudor argues that the threat present in horror narratives can be, almost without exception, divided in three ways: internal/external, autonomous/dependent and supernatural/secular. By doing

⁴ Mark Jancovich, Introduction to *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. M. Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

⁵ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

this, he plots the development and trends of the genre in a methodical, and indeed mathematical manner, before bringing theoretical concerns into the fray. The advantage of his approach is that by reducing the narrative elements of horror films to the most basic constituents, he covers a significant number of texts while avoiding problems in the slippage of terms like ‘horror’ and ‘gothic’. Further to this he manages to stay away from a cavalier approach to genre that would ignore the pragmatic nature of genres in the cinema industry.

Tudor’s investigation is based on the qualities of the ‘threat’, and this is more often than not, the monster. The threat/monster is, arguably, the fulcrum on which horror narratives pivot, and I have mentioned Tudor’s approach here as it provides a tangible account of the period during which the threat in horror narratives shifted from external to internal, and from supernatural to secular.⁶ The vampire of the 1940s and alien of the 1950s turned into the psychopath-next-door of the 1960s. The ‘family horror’, as Jancovich has since called it, was thrust onto the screen and into popular circulation in this period, and it remains a feature of modern horror narratives. The typical monsters of the supernatural and the occult found themselves overthrown as the locus of fear by the mundane, the banal and ordinary. For Noël Carroll, the gratification in the narrative logic of the horror film is based on discovery.⁷ At the centre of these stories is something ‘unknowable’ (Tudor’s ‘threat’, and usually, how to defeat it), something that exists outside of the framework through which we ordinarily view the world. Carroll asserts that the paradox of horror is in being attracted to something that is repellent, being motivated by something that is generally found to be disturbing. The family horror film is symptomatic of Carroll’s idea, and

⁶ Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, 49.

⁷ Noël Carroll, “Why Horror?” in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. M. Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 39.

this style of film has flourished, and directors including George Romero, Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven, Larry Cohen, Brian De Palma, David Cronenberg and John Carpenter have contributed to (and indeed become synonymous with) the family horror sub-genre.

Understanding horror narratives based on the relationship between films and their socio-historical context of production is in stark contrast with psychoanalytic approaches (such as those based in repression and sado-masochism).⁸ Tudor posits that these are, broadly, the approaches to horror that most theorists have taken; the latter path looking for universal explanations based on particular observations (presenting the genre as essential and immutable), and the former focusing on particular explanations, avoiding general questions as to ‘why’, as a culturally grounded appraisal has always already answered the question, in some measure. The first approach relies on “specific textual features and distinct social circumstances”⁹ and Tudor warns on the difficulty of this approach, the unknowability of a particular consumer’s method and strategy of appropriation of the text, whether contemporary or historical. He also suggests that commonly, the most basic claims regarding horror films have been centred on the presumed thematic importance of the narrative. Obvious examples of the kinds of texts that generate such responses include the invasion narratives and narratives of technocracy and mass society of the 1940s and 50s, and of course the family horror film of the 1960s. Despite modifying this stance a little in more recent work, Tudor is nonetheless suggesting that horror films are a significant form of expression of popular cultural fears (despite his simultaneous

⁸ Andrew Tudor, “Why horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre” in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. M. Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 50-51. Originally printed in *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (1997), 443-463. I am using the more recent version as it contains significant additions.

⁹ Ibid.

warnings regarding the difficulties of this kind of approach). Many accounts of the reasons horror films have been a consistent presence in cinema production are derived from socio-cultural circumstances, and networks of relationships between particular social upheavals and the kinds of films made can be found in a broad range of texts. There is a distinct sense of ‘screen imitating life’ with some phases of horror production, and many films appear to have strong connections with specific occurrences such as wars, or popular fears and anxieties about science, medicine or psychology. There are demonstrable trends in horror films, as Tudor’s statistical analysis attests, and while the link between culture and screen is theoretically problematic, it obviously has a very real power and relevance. How we understand this link is of course the subject of conjecture.

More support for evaluation and analysis based directly on cultural circumstances and contexts comes from David Skal, who is absolutely clear about the links he sees between social experience and the production of horror cinema. He uses the violation of the body as a stepping-off point:

Horror films of the seventies and eighties began exhibiting symptoms remarkably similar to some of those suffered by victims of post-traumatic stress syndrome: startle reactions, paranoia, endless scenes of guerrilla-like stalking, and, like traumatic flashbacks, endlessly repeated images of nightmare assaults on the human body, especially its sudden and explosive destruction.¹⁰

Skal parallels the fixation in American popular culture on the physical malleability of the human body with the ‘explosion’ of plastic surgery as an elective medical procedure, and further, the repercussions of images of the Vietnam war on American popular culture. He emphasizes the reshaping of the body in increasingly violent ways (liposuction in particular) as a medical parallel to the on-screen physical

¹⁰ David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (London: Plexus, 1993), 311.

transformations common in horror and science-fiction films, and sums up an aspect of horror in popular circulation very succinctly when claiming that “in a sense, the entire twentieth-century history of increasingly abstracted human forms in fine art was recapitulated in the pop medium of horror, science-fiction and fantasy films”.¹¹ For Skal, the horror film seems to be an artistic catharsis, continually, and violently, exploring the human body in response to everyday fears. His perspective is underpinned by absolute reliance on the strength of the link between cinema and culture.

Discussions of the corporal preoccupation of film are of course widespread. Patrick Fuery makes the claim that it is important to understand “how the excesses of the body always threaten whatever restrictions ... may be placed on it”.¹² For Fuery, cinema is a medium that is ultimately controlling the body, through “containment and pacification”, contextualizing and framing representations of bodies in order to perpetuate a “docile corporeality”. For Fuery it is through this eruption of bodily excess that narrative threatens what he sees as restrictive discursive practices of cinema. Skal explains the grotesque physical excesses of the body present in horror narratives as a symptom of a wider unease about the body, and by the associations he makes with medicine and war, the mortality of the body. Fuery, however, asserts that the lack of ‘containability’ of bodily excess might in fact be a textual ‘tactic’ deployed specifically to emphasize that we can never remove the dis-ease about bodily mortality. The damage and destruction caused to the body, particularly in so-called ‘slasher’ films, is an exploration, perhaps a perpetual attempt to come to terms with the unknown aspects of the body. The distinction between the two positions here

¹¹ Skal, 313

¹² Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000): 72

seems to be a matter of perspective; for Skal, the text is demonstrating the results of a society crippled by its fear of death and the destruction of the body, whereas Fuery's perspective – by demonstrating that it will not submit to the efforts of cinematic discourse to contain bodily excess - is alerting us to the fact that this fear exists at all. This is splitting hairs, so I will suggest here that both of these positions can support the same conclusion; in violently (and literally) 'opening up' the body, horror films are offering a space for reading strategies that allow questions about widespread concerns of mortality to be asked (while no doubt simultaneously offering voyeuristic or pornographic pleasure to those peering inside the 'open' body).

Disruption of the Social Order

The body is graphically invaded, examined, humiliated and disintegrated in the body-horror style of film-making, and this preoccupation leads into notions about the grotesque and carnival, which are strongly linked to (but not *necessarily* so) the horror film. Kristeva sees the carnivalesque as a world 'in the margins':

The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture. Bakhtin was the first to study this logic, and he looked for its roots in carnival. Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest.¹³

This logic of exceeding codified discourse, accessed through the carnival, is a complex and active space, and for Bakhtin, does not acknowledge the distinction between actor and spectator. The carnival itself existed for medieval people in sharp contrast to the established, primarily ecclesiastical rituals and festivals. Bakhtin calls this a second world, and a second life, existing for all medieval people outside of

¹³ Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 36.

officialdom. There are three facets of the carnival: the feast, parodic literature and the market place. All are linked through grotesque realism, and more particularly, the grotesque body. Fuery's list of qualities that he sees as carnivalesque in film include excess, the inability to distinguish between 'dream' sequences and the everyday, ideas of social disruption, dark comic humour, resistance to laws, the appearance of the grotesque, liminal spaces and distorted time periods.¹⁴

Grotesqueness, as (for example) physical excesses of the body, is a major component in cinema as a whole, and certainly not all of this can be construed as carnivalesque. Fuery uses the example of director David Cronenberg, whose work depicts excesses of the body as alarming or disturbing, but not necessarily repulsive, drawing a distinction here between the grotesque of the carnivalesque, and the grotesque of the horror film, which is intentionally repellent. Horror seldom turns away from excesses of the body, as in eating, drinking, sexual activity, defecating and of course dying. For Fuery these excesses are not necessarily part of the carnivalesque, but rather are a catalyst for inversion in the social order of films, which can lead to a reading privileging carnivalesque ideas. Fuery importantly notes that a distinction should be drawn between the representation of social disruption, or inversion, and the potential for the film 'to disrupt the social environment of the spectator.'¹⁵ This distinction is important to the second half of this chapter, and much of what will be discussed in the textual analyses in the following chapters; the specific visual and thematic representation of an aspect of a film, as contrasted with the film's potential or capacity to elicit a response from the spectator. Of course, narratives exist in which a social disruption is presented on screen in such a manner as to actually challenge the

¹⁴ Fuery, 117-123.

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

audience member, using devices that we may understand as carnivalesque, but equally, social disruption may be presented in a manner that is not, in demonstration, going to ask questions of the spectator.

The carnival implies a sense of resistance to laws, which entails not only resistance to laws as social order, but also to the resistance of the laws governing the form itself, like narrative, for example. Fuery sees this resistance as crucial to the implications of the narrative; “Once films break down the substance-causality connections – that is, the fundamentally given of narrative sequences – then there is a direct challenge to the laws of narrative itself”.¹⁶ Turner seems to agree here, although he is looking at the situation from the reverse angle. He argues that “[i]n narratives which seem able to propose critical reformulations of the dominant structures, the foregrounding of the individual style of the narrative – visual, verbal, structural – is important.”¹⁷ I would extend this claim to say that alongside challenges to the narrative form, stylistic tactics of this fashion, through challenging visual effects, are potentially able to disturb the viewer, to disrupt ‘ordinary’ patterns. Turner continues by asserting:

[the] adoption of styles which attack, oppose, or fracture realist expectations carries with it considerable potential for giving to the point of view of the text a putative sense of autonomy, by reducing its referential dimension and dramatizing its role as fiction.¹⁸

There is a clear departure here from Freeland’s proposed importance of the realist horror, but I suggest the two perspectives are not incompatible. A disruption in narrative and stylistic systems, rather than coherence of the social orders within texts, allows a critical perspective on films that takes anti-realism into account within the larger system of realist cinema.

¹⁶ Fuery, 120.

¹⁷ Graeme Turner, *National Fictions* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 138.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The carnivalesque has, for Fuery, a sense of disruption that is not necessarily a destructive force. Distortion, excess, caricature, perversion, inversion and subversion are present, but in a way that is firmly located in the everyday, the real, the legal and the social. Making sense of this is, to some extent, dependent on our conception of realism and reality in film. Fuery argues that the function of ‘realism’ in a film is not necessarily to make the text bear resemblance to ‘reality’, but to form coherence within texts. The science fiction film is indicative of this. It seems that a transgression of the diegetic social order established by a film is commonly conceived of as a transgression of the social order of the culture from which a particular film has been produced. Even in the most obscure narratives, there are elements in the depicted social order which audiences recognize and identify, which in horror cinema gives strength to the anxiety of the *unheimlich*, the power of horror present in the familiar and everyday. The very act of watching a film takes place in a space in which viewers can move outside of normal expectations. Foregone conclusions and assumptions about daily life can be set aside. Fuery calls this is the cinematic carnivalesque, the space for social inversion.¹⁹ Importantly, this social inversion always takes place within the recognized social order. Even the strongest of excesses in a film take place within a cultural schema negotiated by film and viewer.

In these accounts of the horror film, the common ground exists in the notion that horror “trades” in transgression.²⁰ Horror exploits, through transgression, the play in boundaries between genres, between screen and viewer, between artifact and society and between systems of organization both within the text, and in wider society. In the

¹⁹ Fuery, 115.

²⁰ Tudor, “Why Horror?,” 60.

textual analyses that follow in subsequent chapters - by investigating transgressions in Australian cinema relating to ideas such as the carnivalesque, the uncanny, and rural and urban alienation (especially relating to the family) - I will argue that insights into Australian cinema and Australian culture (not necessarily in direct association with one another) can be pieced together by mobilizing ideas gained from the analysis of the relationship between horror films and culture.

Genres, Intertextuality and Transgression

Genre is, of course, a primary filter through which we come to understand and interpret fictional texts, and as such must be addressed. It is, however, the site of much theoretical contestation, as it is a concept that is paradoxical, yet pragmatically essential. Any substantial investigation of film genres has to account for the notion that “[t]hey are driven by bundles of unresolved tensions, suspensions, and contradiction.”²¹ Annette Kuhn offers a map for navigating through the theoretical obstacles of this difficult terrain, which I will use as a guide. She explains some of the tension implicit in theoretical engagement with genre for those studying cinema:

...genre criticism has been vitiated from the start by an uneasy relationship between *genre* on the one hand – broad theories of how genre works in cinema, and *genres* on the other – studies of individual film genres, the western, the gangster film, film noir, and so on.²²

The difficulties inherent when incorporating issues of genre into film analysis are complicated by the separate concerns of genre and genres. For Kuhn, genre criticism comes in the form of trends, as critics tend towards particular groups of films, that may or may not be regarded as of the same genre, yet their discussions remain at arms

²¹ Martin Rubin, *Thrillers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 268.

²² Annette Kuhn, “Cultural Theory and Science Fiction Cinema”, Introduction to *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 2.

length from engaging with these films in terms of their genre. While genres attract attention, genre remains undisturbed. This is, she claims, something of an unfortunate by-product of the difficulty of “piecing together [...] fragments of a critical literature.”²³ Accordingly, the problem of delineating generic characteristics in an absolute fashion, even in relation to single, or small groups of films, has led to a relative decline in genre theory more generally.

For Kuhn, the problem she identifies can be partially addressed by contextualizing specific investigations in different terms. She writes that “perhaps more interesting, and probably more important, than what a film genre *is* is the question of what, in cultural terms, it *does* –its ‘cultural instrumentality’.”²⁴ This distances an analysis from the problem of genre criticism, while remaining firmly focussed on the genre in question by isolating aspects of its socio-cultural impact. Further, this helps to think of genres in relation to the significance that is able to be interpreted from the network of intertextual links that generic fictions implicate, rather than in relation to nebulous ideas about their relationship to the category to which they supposedly participate in. In essence, this approach formulates genre as a cultural expression, rather than a taxonomic expression, and is a notion that underpins much of my investigation.

The theoretical potential of identifying patterns of intertextual reference is considerable. Carol Laseur has encapsulated the intertextuality of generic texts in popular culture. She writes:

...popular culture is captured only in “fleeting moments” or in the passing gestures that a text makes to cultural icons, tropes and motifs. Those self-conscious and self-reflexive moments in a given text [...] work with an

²³ Kuhn, 5.

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

understanding of the audience's positioning within a popular cultural paradigm.²⁵

Popular cultural generic texts, then, might be seen as self-aware expressions of the knowledge of cultural networks and discourses within narrative, and as such, function within genres by accessing or hailing such networks of ideas. Laseur goes on to say (of the "fleeting moments"):

They arise from the contemporary film text's capacity to rearrange popular genres, to cite familiar references and intertexts, and to make gestures towards certain conventions and formulae in a narrative time/space frame.²⁶

This kind of self-reflexive, intertextual sophistication, simultaneously constituting and performing generic organization, is epitomized in that peculiar and amorphous group of texts that are regarded as 'cult', a designation to which horror films are often attached.²⁷ Barry K. Grant suggests "one useful idea about all cult movies is that in some way they involve a form of "transgression" and that this quality is central to their appeal."²⁸ This transgression however creates a paradoxical situation; "[a]s in classic genre films, then, the viewer ultimately gains the double satisfaction of both rejecting dominant cultural values and remaining safely inscribed within them."²⁹

O'Regan (albeit in relation to television) affirms this position, arguing that "[t]elevision is, as ever, simultaneously a stout perpetrator and an active underminer of prevailing national cultural and national political formations."³⁰ The deployment of a text as politically subversive, then, partially rests on the access to knowledge of intertextual references and links, as "popular culture is increasingly seen as diversified

²⁵ Carol Laseur, "Seeing Film: Reading Contemporary Film Culture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Murdoch University, 1998), 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 15-16.

²⁷ For a thorough examination of the notion of 'cult' texts, see Leanne McRae, "Questions of Popular Cult(ure)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Murdoch University, 2002).

²⁸ Barry Keith Grant, "Science Fiction Double Feature: Ideology in the Cult Film," in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond all Reason*, ed. J. P. Telotte (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 123.

²⁹ Ibid., 124.

³⁰ Tom O'Regan, *Australian Television Culture* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 97.

and demanding of its audience's intertextual literacy and interpretative activity.”³¹ It is useful in this situation to think of genre in terms of the cultural networks informing the intertextual composition of generic films, as both cues to formulating genres, and as clues to the ways texts and audiences mobilize intertextual literacies as a strategy of resistance.

Cinema and Culture

The analysis of cinema, whether evaluative or interpretive, has a necessary but complicated preoccupation with itself. The questions of what we can say about films, who we are speaking for, and why, are the subject of continued vigorous conjecture. I want to focus on one section of the varying debates in circulation, involving the relationship between cinema and the culture from which it arises. Christopher Williams succinctly describes this relationship, from which some of the problems can be inferred. Of films, he says:

[T]hey have their own autonomies – which is to say, their own specific systems, rules, methods and materials – but they also stand in a complex relationship with the sets of practices, institutions and experiences which we have perhaps rather abusively summed up under the heading of ‘the real world’.³²

In essence, the relationship between a cinematic text and its cultural contexts (social and political, generally) is complicated. It is a relationship that calls the very nature of representation into question, clearly a question too big for a thesis not directly focussed on such. Fortunately, more simply, the relationship between text and culture suggests cautious consideration of the basis on which we formulate and circulate certain kinds of claims about cinema.

³¹ I.Q. Hunter and Heidi Kaye, Introduction to *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and its Audience*, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q.Hunter, Heidi Kaye and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 2.

³² Christopher Williams, “Introduction” in *Realism and the Cinema*, ed Christopher Williams (London: Routledge, 1980), 3.

Returning to my opening comments regarding *Day of The Dead*, and competing evaluative positions; implicit in these evaluations, and others like them, is the presumption that there is a direct and unmediated link between the narrative and its originating culture, and it is this that needs to be scrutinized. This presumption often goes quite deliberately unquestioned in socio-cultural (and indeed legal) discourses encircling the production and consumption of horror films, as they have a tendency to generate responses akin to moral panic. Common sense approaches to this problem are difficult. One could say that, pragmatically speaking, it is unproblematic to forge a link between the screen and its society of origin. It is obviously folly to think that cinema floats freely outside of culture, but equally to propose a definitive causal relationship between a culture and its cinematic output, at the very least, reduces the effectiveness of analysis by ignoring the networks of different social discourses that operate through and around each other. What is certain, ironically, is that there are considerable “uncertainties about what the connections between contexts and artifacts are.”³³ Examination of the way in which the reading of cinema interacts with socio-cultural concerns, as opposed to the way film may be seen as a vessel into which cultural contexts are poured, is required. In O’Regan’s words, the cultural contexts of a cinema text (what I would express as the discursive networks surrounding it) - the specific historical, political, or industrial circumstances that are invoked when analysing a film – are to be seen as “a contributing factor to the organization of a text’s discourse not an explanation of it.”³⁴

³³ Williams, 3.

³⁴ Tom O’Regan, “Re-Thinking the Australian film revival” in *History on/and/in Film: Proceedings of the 3rd History and Film Conference*, eds T. O’Regan and B. Shoesmith (Perth: History and Film Association of Australia, 1987), 116.

The importance of films as self-referential texts is not to be overlooked here. Films construct systems of social and political organization, for example, as ways of establishing coherence and realism. Character actions and narrative developments, among other elements of the film text, operate in reference to these systems of organization established by the film, and not in reference to systems of organization exterior to the boundaries of the text and screen. While the socio-politico-cultural landscape within a film may look familiar, it is not necessarily equivalent to the 'real' thing. The relationship between a film - particularly the internal social systems and presumptions it constructs - and the wider culture out of which it is created, is brought under scrutiny in light of the inescapable (albeit variable) disconnectedness of the subject of a cultural artifact and the culture itself. This is linked to Fuery's assertions regarding the function of realism mentioned previously. Realism operates in film in order to create coherence within a text, not necessarily to create a link between the screen and society, and it is the same kind of coherence that is created through the positing of recognizable systems of social, legal, historical, sexual and cultural organization. It is helpful to address these aspects of film in tandem. For cinematic texts, the self-referential realism based on internal coherence, and the associated disconnection from its originating culture that a representational text demonstrates, are indicators of a distinction between artifact and culture, between a piece of cinema and its social, industrial or cultural context.

However, to say this is not to devalue the social, historical or political importance of cinema. In fact, it serves quite the opposite function. In understanding the troublesome nature of the dividing line between film and its cultural context, the process of representation is called into question, and this can obviously be a process

that is highly politically charged. The problem of representation in the pragmatic sense, the logic of something that ‘stands for’ something else, is central to the difficulty in making claims about relationships such as that between culture and artifact in textual interpretation and analysis. If this *stands for* that, then clearly, this *is not* that. This problem is exemplified by the status of cinema as, for want of a better expression, the offspring of photography, a medium historically prized for its accurate and ‘truthful’ representation of reality. Analysis of film must be mindful of these concerns while remaining committed to the potential of cultural artifacts as objects of scrutiny. Further to this, the relationship between artifact and culture must be envisaged as just that, a two-way transference of ideas, images and readings. Culture informs cinema in a multitude of ways because, of course, cinema is a cultural product. Importantly, however, cinema informs culture. The two-way flow of information here is critical in understanding and empowering the relationship between cinema and culture. More than this though, the relationship between cinema and culture must be understood in light of the myriad social networks that intersect the discourses of cinema. Issues of nation, identity, social formations of gender, scientific and legal discourses, to name but a few, all encircle cinema in this process of generating meaning.

Assuming a uniform and repeatable system of relations between culture and cinema must also be avoided. O’Regan suggests that the link must be established through specific criticisms, not assumed to be a straightforward, always inferable phenomenon.³⁵ It is necessary then, when considering films and the cultural circumstances of their production, to form broad and free-flowing links between these

³⁵ O’Regan, “Re-Thinking the Australian Film Revival,” 116.

sites, rather than making claims that reduce the relationship to a restricted, one way imposition of meaning that leads directly from a historically positioned cultural context to the cinema screen. Christine Gledhill agrees, in particular arguing for a concept of genre (a specific kind of critical approach to cinema, in this context) that is “capable of exploring the wider contextual culture in relationship to, rather than as an originating source of, aesthetic mutations and textual complications.”³⁶

Social Contexts and Theoretical Intersections

It is clear, then, that the link between cinema and culture is a small portion of a much larger system of links between signs and meanings that are generated through complex networks of social discourses. Analysis of cinema has become a crucial part of the social and political struggle of (for example) many marginalized communities. Tessa Perkins suggests that “any film can be looked at in terms of its political significance, and the relationship between films and politics is neither singular nor stable” and goes on to say “lack of a conscious (or acknowledged) political intent by its makers does not make a film unpolitical.”³⁷ While acknowledging the unstable, or rather, the changeable nature of the relationship between film and culture, in some ways this approach circumvents the problems of the relationship by arguing, more or less, that it doesn’t *really* matter, that issues of political and social justice are not fought in the space between viewer and screen. Asserting the theoretical strength of films, Perkins argues that “films are documents which provide empirical evidence.”³⁸ She makes this statement in reference to the project of “separatist politics” (black and

³⁶ Christine Gledhill, “Rethinking Genre,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 221.

³⁷ Tessa Perkins, “Who (and What) Is It For?” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 82.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

gender, specifically) in uncovering new evidence for socio-political interpretation. This critical position is often taken up outside academia, suggesting that the importance of the filmic text as a weapon in the struggle over social, cultural and political sites of contest is not reliant on a clear and identifiable correlation between screen and 'reality'. I'm not entirely at odds with Perkins' perspective, but I would suggest that it is the very difficulty in identifying, or establishing any direct and repeatable link between cultural context and cinematic work that enables what we might call (in the context of Perkins' argument) oppositional, or resistive readings.³⁹

Perkins covers a range of theoretical positions to film in suggesting a reinvigoration of the "importance of the politics of representation"⁴⁰, and makes the following observation about varied reading strategies investigated during research into lesbian responses to the representation of lesbians in the media and film:

...disagreements about what was happening, why some character did something or over the general sense of the film's position were few and far between. In this sense everyone agreed about the 'preferred meaning' of the films we discussed. It is at the level of emotional, aesthetic and political responses, judgments about the film's 'relation to the real or to the possible' and opinions about the media's role and responsibilities that both intrapersonal and interpersonal differences emerge.⁴¹

Crucially, the relationship to the real or possible that a film negotiates and constructs, the very link that has been discussed here to this point, is the area that Perkins identifies as of significance to the film viewers in question, regardless of the way the viewer interprets the 'preferred meaning'. This is useful in drawing a line between a pragmatic approach to the political potential of cinema as a whole, and the theoretical

³⁹ I use 'resistive' here in line with the meaning suggested by Stuart Hall in "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.

⁴⁰ Perkins, 92.

⁴¹ Ibid.

necessity of problematizing the relationship between cinema and culture. Clearly, these two necessities of interpretation are not diametrically opposed.

The further question is raised here, however, of the way in which meaning is constructed in a film text; a concern that is related to, but not dependent on, understanding the difficulty in forming permanent or unmoveable tactics for cinema analysis. Steven Cohan proposes a pragmatic, and perhaps more accessible idea of film analysis. He argues that the reading one elicits from cinematic texts is primarily dependent on the theoretical methodology applied. He writes:

This is not to suggest that a film can mean just about anything, but that its meanings are determined through interaction with a critical theory. Interpreting therefore amounts to much more than deriving a film's theme; interpretation makes the film an object of inquiry in its own right, a text. Furthermore, as interpreters of a film, we need to recognize that a text has its own specificity but also a porous historical materiality, with regard to its field of reference when first produced and as it continues to be viewed.⁴²

The suggestion here is that there is a diachronic aspect to analyses that is unavoidable, as a film not only exists in a historical framework, but "in its own right." As a corollary to this, I will turn back to O'Regan, who adopts a cautionary stance against presuming a unified theoretical position from which to approach multiple texts within an industry's total catalogue, or indeed a phase in national cinema production.⁴³

Again, this supports the concept of the changeable nature of the network of relationships around cinema, culture, and viewer. The process of interpretation, of 'making meaning', is caught up in this network, and is accordingly subject to mutation and change. The interpreters of film then, are bound to an extent by their apparatus, or by their location in this network of relations.

⁴² Steven Cohan, "Case Study: Interpreting *Singin' in the Rain*," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 53.

⁴³ O'Regan, "Re-Thinking the Australian Film Revival," 116.

For Turner the analysis of film or literature is unavoidably an examination of the culture out of which texts are produced. Neither the texts, nor the process of analysis are situated outside of larger systems of signification or meaning, and, by examining the systems of representation and meaning in text, wider ideological positions are brought into question. The danger here is in inadvertently putting forward a position from which every text becomes 'about' nation or nationality (for example). Therefore, specific textual analyses must be mindful of the wider cultural and ideological concerns that are unavoidably implicated, while remaining sufficiently focussed on the nuances and idiosyncrasies in the text itself. Bill Nichols expresses this by claiming: "We may not know what it is that a representation, a symbolic sign system or utterance, a film or painting, stands for if we do not share the cultural context from which it stems."⁴⁴ Again, the distinction between 'textual' reality and 'actual' reality is central.

The suggestion for walking a useful middle ground between text and culture (in relation to nation in this example) is an approach that "examines what is 'national' about the narratives by tracing the activity of the culture's own set of values and beliefs and the ways in which it reproduces these values and beliefs in the individual text".⁴⁵ The emphasis here is in similarity, in identifying those codes and systems that appear to reach across the divide between cinema and its culture, after all, "[f]ilms mean because people want them to mean."⁴⁶ The process of creating and consuming cinema presupposes a project of communication and desire, on both the part of the

⁴⁴ Bill Nichols, "Film Theory and the Revolt Against Master Narratives," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 44.

⁴⁵ Turner, 20.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "How Films Mean, or, From Aesthetics to Semiotics and Half-Way Back Again," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 10.

film-making team and the viewer. Implied in the process of meaning-making are the viewer's subjectivities (cultural, political, social and otherwise), and the divide between cinema and culture that has been the preoccupation of much of this chapter. Bill Nichols summarizes part of this process in saying that "[w]ho gets to represent what to whom and why; what image, icon or person shall stand for what to whom are questions in a form that allows issues of visibility and cinematic representation to tie into issues of social and political consequence"⁴⁷ The problem inherent in the culture/artifact divide, related to the problem of representation, is the very thing that allows a questioning aspect towards cinema to be taken.

Kelly Oliver suggests that interpreting and making meaning of film is a much more rigid and directed activity, and that the act of interpreting film is a process of questioning, or challenging, the strategies incorporated into the film itself that aim to support or perpetuate existing social and cultural modes of naturalizing domination.⁴⁸ I am hesitant, even given the context of my own project, to ascribe such a *directly* politically motivated flavour to film analysis. Nonetheless, claiming that interpreting film involves questioning on a grander scale than just the screen is certainly not in question here. For Fuery the importance of films, in a social sense, is seen as being played out on its 'boundaries'. These boundaries include:

...the boundaries within the films themselves (the represented social order); the boundaries between the film's world order and the wider social environment; and the boundaries between these two social orders of the film and the spectator ... The movements and connections between these boundaries, and how the film spectator engages with them, tells us much about film and its relationship to social orders ... the audience maps out the familiar even in the most unfamiliar of landscapes.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Nichols, 45.

⁴⁸ Kelly Oliver, "The Politics of Interpretation," in *Philosophy and Film*, eds C. A. Freeland and T. E. Wartenburg (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴⁹ Fuery, 110.

While I have identified important considerations about the relationship between a cinematic text and its originating culture, I have attempted to reinforce the importance of analysis that is mindful of the opportunities such a distinction permits. Ultimately, I contend that it is necessary to have a highly pragmatic destination in film analysis. Films are real things that exist in real cultures, watched, and manufactured, by real people with real lives. As a result, Fuery's analysis suggests that established textual reality, the social order constructed and contained within the boundaries of the text, inevitably reproduces systems of social and cultural organization.⁵⁰ Crossing boundaries between cinema text and culture is patently not a restrictive practice. This is a claim that is supported by Christine Gledhill, who suggests that the crossing of boundaries such as genre is not so much a challenge to the notion itself as is perhaps thought, but rather, an opportunity for "productive sites of cultural activity."⁵¹ These worlds necessarily intersect, as "genres are fictional worlds, but they do not stay within fictional boundaries"⁵² I return to the importance of boundaries in Chapter Four, and develop this idea further in relation to horror cinema.

It is worth mentioning, albeit briefly, the cultural practice of cinema as a social activity, and the implications of this for film analysis. I'm thinking specifically here of the interaction we have with others subsequent to watching a film. We are generally keen to talk about films we have seen with others, compare notes as it were, and this is an aspect of the cultural importance of films that impacts directly on the all-important film/culture link. For Noël Carroll, "it is this aspect of film-going to which recent film scholarship pays little attention."⁵³ However Carroll does

⁵⁰ Fuery, 110.

⁵¹ Gledhill, 224.

⁵² Ibid., 241.

⁵³ Carroll, "Introducing Film Evaluation", 266.

distinguish between this activity, performed by the casual film-goer, as evaluation, as opposed to the work of the film scholar, which he refers to as interpretation.

Nonetheless, this does not reduce the potency of less formal discourses of film evaluation and analysis for theories about the pragmatic cultural significance of cinema. Nowell-Smith suggests that the problem for studies of the way in which films make meaning is the precise nature of the communication between film and viewer.

The process of meaning-making from film to viewer is not in question. What is suspect, for Nowell-Smith, is the 'language' that occupies the space between film and viewer.⁵⁴ I would suggest that this language is in part informed by the social aspect of cinema-going. Sidestepping theoretical concerns of, say, the cognitive unknowns of the process of representation, it is justifiable to claim that it is not simply the process of watching a film that informs the meaning-making process.

I have covered several critical perspectives that, to me, appear to be alluding to the same issue, including: Bakhtin's blurring of the boundary between actor and spectator in relation to carnival; Fuery's distinction between the representation of social disruption and the potential for a film to disrupt the social world of the spectator; and the unavoidable but uncertain relationship between a film and its originating culture. It is in the 'spaces between' – the uncertain boundaries and intersections - that the complexity and confusion for film analysis lies. The space between a culture and its artifacts, the space between a text and a reader, the intersections of complex discursive practices, and the space between personal identity struggles and political performance are all implied through the study of cinema. The relationship between people and their representational strategies is a site of enormous struggle. I have

⁵⁴ Nowell-Smith, 10.

exemplified this in the relationship cinema negotiates with culture, in the space in which meaning is formed between viewer and screen, and in the distinction between the real and the textual. By pointing out these distinctions, by forcing the 'pairs' to give a little, the space is created to tackle, for example, the representational problems faced by minorities, or marginalized communities, and to allow an investigation into specific films that is informed by their importance as cultural artifacts, and artifacts that unavoidably involve themselves in a relationship with a viewer that contains this critical space. Coupled with the play in boundaries exploited by the horror film, and the uncertainties of generic legibility, a strategy for the examination of undercurrents in Australian cinema will be developed throughout this dissertation. I have suggested a vocabulary and method for analysing Australian film that is pragmatic enough to account for industrial and cultural concerns, while remaining theoretically rigorous enough to allow close textual analysis of the formal characteristics of films.

Chapter Two - The Myth of the Australian



Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg, 1971)

...the Australian landscape as mirror to the soul reflects the grotesque and the desolate rather than the beautiful and the tranquil.¹

Australian film has increasingly embraced discourses which tell us about the instability and indeterminacy of national aspirations, ethos and experience.²

In the cultural project of articulating and perpetuating representations of Australia(n), there is an undercurrent of misogyny, violence and racism beneath the predominant mode of expression – that of the white, middle class, colonial male. Undercurrents of these kinds do not, it would seem, escape the scrutiny of literature and film as easily as they evade popular memory and myth. Accordingly, this project is underscored by a preoccupation with cultural discourses encircling the cinema, and how these networks and nodes draw often resistive undercurrents into view. The concern in this chapter, as the starting point for engaging with films more closely, is the way in which Australian narratives, primarily of the bush, engage with ideas of the ‘national’, and what, in fact, this means in a wider cultural context. I will be examining the way these films participate in the broad milieu of Australian cinema, in terms of specifically Australian historical and mythical identities. This approach will provide an account of these films as a ‘national’ expression, while highlighting the subversive and malevolent undercurrents that are inextricably wound into such expressions.

I will commence by exploring some of the theoretical and textual connections between history, identity, nation and landscape. This involves investigating aspects of the formation of national myths, the way landscape can affect identity in fictional narratives, and how myths are constructed around politically and socially motivated presumptions about nation, and national types. O’Regan has suggested that:

¹ Graeme Turner, *National Fictions* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 30-31.

² G. Simmons, “From the Bush to the Mall”, *Australian Screen Education* 33 (2003): 58.

...representations of “Australia” and “Australians” have in binding an “imagined community”. Whilst it is not clear what this “Australian voice” might consist in, nor what kind of modifications to film studies are necessary to accommodate its possibility, this very possibility changes how Australian films can be looked at.³

Accordingly, the chapter will investigate the way in which certain films establish a questioning aspect towards categories like ‘Australian’, and indeed, ‘male’. In light of the theoretical difficulties posited in Chapter One, the subsequent investigation will of course pay heed to the ‘spaces’ between boundaries in which, I have argued, the potential for serious interrogation lies. Texts that are involved in representing nation in one way or another do so by accessing discourses and myths of national identity.⁴ Accordingly, criticism and textual analysis must keep in mind those ideological and discursive practices outside of the text for which concepts like nation, identity, and landscape generate a pragmatic significance. Miller and Cunningham have claimed that:

[t]he electronic media are outposts of the nation: on the one hand, the media text transcends all boundaries in its magical voyage through the infinite; on the other, it is subject to regulation by those who control the landscape which it moves across.⁵

Nation, then, is a label and an idea that is not easily separated from an ideological and political perspective. While not explicitly covering the political advantages of a unifying ideal that can subsume identity differences, this chapter occupies a position that sees the deployment of representations of the mythical Australian as, by their very nature, political.

³ Tom O’Regan, “Re-Thinking the Australian Film Revival” in *History on/and/in Film: Proceedings of the 3rd History and Film Conference*, ed T. O’Regan and B. Shoesmith (Perth: History and Film Association of Australia, 1987), 115.

⁴ Turner, 110.

⁵ Stuart Cunningham and Toby Miller, *Contemporary Australian Television* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1994), 17.

Landscape, Identity and Nation

Ambivalence towards the Australian landscape is bound up in textual representations to such a degree that a film set in rural Australia, for example, becomes unavoidably *about* the tensions between urban and rural, nature and culture. So much of our creative cultural output articulates the simultaneous ‘threat and promise’ of the landscape that texts seem condemned to be forever engaged in the tug of war between poles.⁶ Overwhelmingly, fictional representations of the project of European settlement in Australia have articulated a struggle ‘against’ the environment, consequently the continued ‘battle’ of the Australian against ‘his’ land is a pervasive intertextual, thematic motif. The relationship that Australian characters negotiate with their environment and living conditions is a defining characteristic of the perception of ‘Australian-ness’. Characteristics of a national type were the preoccupation of *The Bulletin* in the years leading up to the Federation of Australia, and this spawned what is probably the most well known nationalist myth in Australian fiction, and indeed Australian culture; the bush legend of the 1890s. The characteristics of the 1890s bushman represented characteristics, then and now, presumed to be the aspiration of all Australians. Egalitarian, resourceful and resilient, the mythical bushman snubbed the authority of England (and indeed, systems of authority in general), forged a life from the land and upheld the virtues of mateship and equality. This is an ideal that has retained an enormous amount of cultural capital, and is articulated with familiar, insidious sentimentality by Phillip Knightley, who poses the question of whether or not this ‘type’ is, in fact, *Homo Australiensis*.⁷

⁶ Turner, 26.

⁷ Phillip Knightley, *Australia: A Biography of a Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 347.

Despite this apparent cultural acceptance of the stoic bushman, “it is widely accepted that the Australian of the 1890s was no more the mythologized figure produced by the nationalism of the 1890s than we are now”.⁸ Put simply, the bushman of the 1890s did not exist, which is of course no surprise to anyone involved in cultural criticism in Australia. During the 1890s, leading up to Federation, the deployment of a mythical identity such as this by popular publications like *The Bulletin* served to round the sharp edges off issues like racism, sexism and violence.⁹ In Turner’s words, “[t]hat the myth of Australia’s radicalism and egalitarianism can survive the contradictions of one’s everyday experience reveals how effectively it has been mythologised.”¹⁰

Australia is one of the most highly urbanized nations in the world, yet there appears to be a persistent longing observable in our popular culture for the pioneer life, the simple rural life and the satisfaction of conquering the bush. This nostalgic desire is deeply entrenched in social and cultural output and is routinely invoked whenever something about our nation, or our ‘spirit’, is challenged. The legend of the 1890s remains a significant and uncomfortable thorn in the side of those wishing to call the mythical representation of an egalitarian Australia into question. It has become an all-too-convenient fallback position for those seeking to defend the disposition of white, male, middle Australia. One need only recall the debate leading up to the 1999 republic referendum to see the way in which this mythical man, or at least the qualities attributed to him, casts a perpetual shadow over our cultural output, often masking issues of social injustice.

⁸ Turner, 123.

⁹ For a detailed exploration of the ‘imaginary’ Australian nation, and the popular texts and cultural factors informing this imagination, at the end of the nineteenth century, see Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Turner, 108.

The Federation of Australia was, of course, accompanied by interest in what it might mean to be Australian, and this necessarily involved forming some distinctions.¹¹ It follows unsurprisingly, then, that the Australian landscape, antithetical to the European landscape, would serve as the basis from which ideas of a national ‘type’ could arise. The Australian landscape was pivotal in the creation and perpetuation of the myth of the 1890s, and, I would suggest, remains in sharp focus for a large portion of cultural articulations of Australian life. The bush legend, the myth of the 1890s, is now the myth of the Australian, and is not something that has been historically circumscribed.¹² Indeed, the outback has become synonymous with something of the identity of the Australian myth, and is “a space which has been traditionally associated with hegemonic paradigms of masculinity and Australian national identity.”¹³

The Australian landscape is tightly woven into the fabric of popular culture. One of the most pervasive and consistent features of Australian fiction is the relationship between people and their surroundings. Resonating throughout Australian Cinema, landscape is like a character, an omnipresent fixture in on-screen storytelling. Accordingly, landscape is deeply entrenched in national myths about identity. Anne Marie Willis has claimed:

Whether we are talking about coffee-table art books, films, literature or informed scholarship, landscape is the most pervasive theme in Australian high culture. Of course some kinds of cultural activities merely recycle popular mythologies about the land (of which there are several), others critically engage

¹¹ Turner, 119.

¹² For a succinct explanation of the cultural development of the myth of the bushman, see Peter Goodall, *High Culture, Popular Culture* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995), 88-93.

¹³ Kym McCauley, “From Terror to Terylene and Fit for a Queen. Some Representations of Masculinities in the Outback” in *Our Selection On: Writings on Cinema’s Histories: Selected Papers from the 7th History and Film Conference*, eds. Jeff Doyle, Bill van der Heide and Susan Cowen (Campbell: National Film and Sound Archive/Australian Defence Force Academy, 2000), 207.

with them, but few dispute its central significance or attempt to counter its centrality.¹⁴

A shared physical location unavoidably generates a certain cultural pragmatism that presupposes a shared experience of that location. The problem here is the question of the identities that are expressed, or silenced, by this presumed shared experience. Nation, identity, community, sexuality and social and political ideals are often contested and negotiated in relation to landscape, across the entire spectrum of Australian popular cultural production. Ross Gibson argues that Australian films, “[k]nowingly or unknowingly [...] are all engaging with the dominant mythology of white Australia.”¹⁵ He contends that the preoccupation with the landscape indicates the predisposition of the white settler, who is fundamentally unable to come to terms with the ‘outback’ landscape. He claims that “[i]n some respects, the continent is a symbolic terrain; but in others it seems comprehensible only as ‘extra-systemic’, preternaturally unmanageable or uncultural.”¹⁶ For Gibson the defining characteristic of the Australian landscape is its intractability.

The experience of the white settler in early Australian fiction was primarily dictated by a generally adversarial relationship with the landscape. The literature of this period repeatedly articulates the difficulty of an unfamiliar environment, as there is a tension in the literary productions of early settlers between writing ‘traditional’ forms, and writing about Australia. In relation to settler literature, Shirley Walker claims the environment creates “disturbed and ambiguous responses to it”.¹⁷ Narratives in early Australian literature generally appropriate the landscape differently in ways that might

¹⁴ Anne Marie Willis, *Illusions of Identity: The Art of Nation* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1993), 62.

¹⁵ Ross Gibson, “Formative Landscapes,” in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 45.

¹⁶ Gibson, 49.

¹⁷ Shirley Walker, “Perceptions of Australia, 1855-1915,” *Australian Literary Studies* 13 (1988): 157.

be loosely described as physical and transcendental. On one hand authors depicted the landscape for its own sake, acquiring something like a botanist's outlook towards the environment, whilst others adopted a position in which the landscape was somehow mystical, a pattern that continues with some strength in Australian Cinema. The way in which the landscape is articulated contributes to the way we come to understand it, and accordingly, a relationship exists between the way a text expresses landscape in its narrative, and the perpetuation of national mythologies. Ascribing a mystical quality to the landscape, inferring some hidden power beyond the control of the inhabitants, has a series of repercussions on the inhabitants themselves.

The significance of the enveloping nature of landscape in popular circulation cannot be overstated. Much of the power of the Australian landscape, in fictional texts and indeed, in popular culture more generally, derives from the way in which culture appears to be 'hidden' in representations of nature; that the 'meaning' of the landscape is autochthonous, and immune to ever-changing cultural systems of signification. For Willis:

...visual and word images of landscape have had powerful psychological appeal in which the depiction of distinctive characteristics has been conflated with the 'discovery' of an identity for the nation. In all kinds of contradictory narratives, a national character is seen to spring from the land – timeless, tough, resilient – and imprint itself on people who so recently inhabited it.¹⁸

The land itself necessitates a particular kind of human response that is understood as 'natural'. A national character comes in the form a culturally specific disposition, for Willis, and is the result of a relationship with the landscape that is necessarily shared by all. This creates a problematic position for the analysis of texts concerning the landscape. Turner's position highlights this further:

¹⁸ Willis, 62.

In Marxist theory, the elision of culture into nature is the classic bourgeois use of ideology, and it converts the contingent and interested actions of men and history into the inevitable and disinterested processes of the natural order of things. Its most important effect is that it pre-empts calls for change by removing it from the agenda – one cannot change nature.¹⁹

By naturalizing the relationship that emerges between people and landscape, the potential meanings able to be mobilized are directed and mediated. The problem results from “seeing meaning or knowledge as something that emerges organically from a physical location.”²⁰ The representation of landscape creates and perpetuates mythical identities, through the emergence of meaning and knowledge in the form of desirable characteristics that are apparent prerequisites for survival. These characteristics, articulated in countless texts, naturalized through publications like *The Bulletin*, and consistently alluded to as a common frame of reference to unite disparate characters and identities, become a formula for a type, and the basis of a myth. Scepticism towards the prerequisite characteristics for survival, therefore, appears to be unrealistic, or ‘unnatural’, given the way in which knowledge is presumed to be so directly linked the landscape itself.

Mythical Australian Identities

This insidious causal link between nature and culture, that has informed the discourses of popular culture, functions to “find in nature imaginary resolutions to conflicts which are insoluble in culture” and to “justify and naturalise one’s position within culture ... which will persuade acquiescence in hegemony.”²¹ Turner’s line of argument suggests that, the myth of the bush - of this hostile but promising landscape - is not solely about the rural, but rather, it is a myth about Australia, and it imposes

¹⁹ Turner, 35.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 36.

itself directly onto the rural and urban experience equally and without discrimination. The suggestion is that by accepting survival as the highest and most noble goal we can aspire to, when faced with the violent and inhospitable rural landscape, we metaphorically align our urban, socio-political aspirations accordingly. The most we can hope for is a cheerful resignation to the whims of our environment, it would seem, regardless of whether that environment is ‘natural’ or political.

Accordingly, and perhaps ironically, given the emphasis on the overtly physical qualities in mythical Australian identities, the Australian myth arising from the landscape demands a much more passive relationship than the conquering narrative of American myth (an example which Turner uses as a comparison). However, I would not go so far as to describe survival, in most Australian fictional instances, as a partnership with the land. Much of the survival in Australian fictions is the result of chance, fate and fortune (good or otherwise), rather than any tacit agreement between the European settler and the foreboding bush. Anthony Moran makes a suggestion that:

If it is true [...] that nationalism has been so successful as an ideology because it attends to feelings of vulnerability and mortality, then one might expect that nationalism, and feelings of belonging to national community might become more intense when one experiences personal diversity.²²

From this perspective, I would argue that the Australian mythical identity is powerful as a result of this unavoidable submission to chance and fate, and the struggles of ‘personal diversity’, rather than any inherent character traits which would permit active conquering of the land. I would emphasize, then, Turner’s assessment of the impossibility of conquering the land as centrally important to Australian fiction. The mystical outlook on surroundings, avoiding a botanist’s scientific impartiality, and

²² Anthony Moran, *Australia: Nation, Belonging and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2005), 57.

ascribing significance and meaning to a landscape by deploying ideas of limitless power and the unknown, results directly in an unconquerable domain. Turner claims that success in the rural setting can only be achieved by submitting to fate, and acknowledging the insurmountable power of the environment:

...ours is a myth of accommodation and acceptance which admits the impossibility of conquering the land and merely recommends a manner of survival by learning to live in partnership with it.²³

Myth is a system of communication that serves to purify its constituent information, and the mythical status of the landscape has evolved within discursive practices of historical privileging that act upon certain perspectives and utterances. In

Mythologies, Barthes suggests that “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way which it utters this message.”²⁴ He goes on to say that “...myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.”²⁵ These two statements succinctly explain the importance of cultural texts in the myth-making process. Firstly, a myth does not evolve from anything inherent in the object of the myth itself. Secondly, myths are found in certain types of utterances, particular kinds of speech that are privileged by the discursive formations of national history. The myth of the Australian type, the resourceful, egalitarian and generous man so actively asserted by publications like *The Bulletin*, and still a major cultural icon in Australia, is the result of a gradual accumulation of privileged meanings constructed from representative cultural artifacts.

The question arises as to how criticisms of the mythical Australian type (which are certainly not rare), concerning latent racism and sexism, and undercurrents of hatred

²³ Turner, 118.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Granada Publishing, 1979), 109.

²⁵ Ibid.

and violence, tend to be overlooked in popular circulation. Barthes suggests a kind of cleansing occurs once a cultural artifact engages the realm of mythology. He claims:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them: simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.²⁶

The dark and damaging part of the Australian type is ‘purified’ and ‘justified’ through myth. Only those aspects of the image that are ‘chosen by history’ remain clearly visible. In Turner’s words, “nationalist myths are not unmediated reflections of history but transformations of it.”²⁷ Many texts contain scathing attacks on traditional gender ‘boundaries’, but these aspects of the narratives do not see their reflections in the mirror of the Australian type.

Benedict Anderson has suggested “...nationality, [...] nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind”²⁸. From this we can establish a link between the myth of the Australian type, and the ‘nation-ness’ of Australia. I suggest that nationality is the same ‘particular kind’ of cultural artifact as the myth of the Australian type, an ‘imagined ideal’, conceived in much the same manner as the romantic notions of the bushman, or the drover, or the digger, or any number of specific articulations of the Australian type. Through a system of inclusion and exclusion, particular elements within cultural articulations of a presumed shared experience cohere to form a mythical Australian ‘type’, and consequently, a mythical Australia. This Australia is not a place, so much as a nostalgic longing for a past that, in fact, never existed. Turner argues that “nationalism is an ideology and its cultural function is not to define Australia as a real entity but to represent Australia as an

²⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.

²⁷ Turner, 107.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1996), 4.

ideological construction.”²⁹ Representations are informed by, and inform, ideological positions, and sets of representational strategies, across filmic and literary texts, work together to construct Australia, and Australian, as catch-all mechanisms for the underlying, and far more complex systems of meaning. The theoretical entities of identity, nation, landscape and Australian-ness merge together in popular cultural circulation to form ‘Australia’, the meaning of which reaches across the entirety of cultural productions and articulations.

Of particular importance to the way ‘Australia’ invokes meaning, are the sites and texts in which history and fiction merge. Fiction and history are not separated by those with ownership of ‘facts’ from those without, but rather, they are demarcated by the discursive privileging of particular kinds of information, and particular modes of storytelling. History is a ‘master’ narrative, in which ideas of nation are bound, and from which particular mythical identities are produced, and perpetuated. However, fictional narratives can arguably present alternative possibilities for understanding history, identity, character and nation, as they possess the potential to articulate situations, places and ideas that question what we might call the dominant narrative. In the spaces between fiction and history, and at their points of convergence, Australian identities are struggled over and negotiated. The observations of Julian Pefanis are relevant here:

In French, a single term, *histoire*, on the one hand serves to designate “history” properly speaking, as the succession of events, the play of forces in the unfolding of the idealist schema, a designation warranted by the quasi-juridical form of evidence, fact, and the dialectic. On the other hand *histoire* also refers to the story, fiction, fable, or myth bound by a narrative structure. The bivalence of the term permits a double articulation of fictional elements within the unfolding of history, and a factual basis in the fiction of the fable.³⁰

²⁹ Turner, 122.

³⁰ Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard and Lyotard* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 10.

Pefanis notes the duality of meaning generated by *histoire*, and this suggestive of the links between history and literature, and an acknowledgement that they are collectives of discursive practices, but are not unmovable or impermeable. The way in which readers and critics engage with history and literature forms the foundation for the process of negotiating Australian identities. By negotiating with cultural fictions and histories to articulate personal fictions and histories, it is possible to attempt to redress the imbalance between the inclusion and exclusion in cultural production.

Discussion of the relationship between fictional narratives and history in Australia is routinely situated in the shadow of postcoloniality. Understanding the importance of texts that potentially deliver alternative histories, and alternatives to commonly held perceptions of European settlement, gender and national identity (for example) can be informed by postcolonial perspectives that stress the fallibility of dominant narratives. Fictional texts are able to question representations and discursive practices that uphold the popularly sanctioned history of European settlement in Australia by distancing the narrative, themes or stylistic elements from the typical, Anglo-Saxon perspective of Australia, and its associated stereotypes and presumptions. The ‘truth’ about a text (in terms of its correspondence with the ‘real’), or a mythical identity is irrelevant. It is the way in which the discourse that circulates the myth can subsume and appropriate alternative perspectives that I want to emphasize. For Turner, “the myth of the bushman was as much an urban invention as a rural fact, but its centrality to representations of Australia remains unaffected by invocation of historical truth”.³¹ The deployment of the legend of the 1890s was not about ‘truth’, or accurate and

³¹ Turner, 123.

transparent representation, it was (and is) about unifying the experiences of a varied and disparate population.

The mythical Australian identity, (based on a nationalist version of history) is frequently not commensurate with identities presented in fictional texts. The identity that arises out of nationalism seldom takes into consideration the plight of the non-white or non-male Australian. R. J. Ellis suggests that nationalism “constitutes a structural mechanism effecting a repression of history in a duplicit process of revelation and concealment”³². In a local context, Turner states that nationalism is a filter that enables “the worst aspects of Australian existence to be represented more or less naturalistically.”³³ The concealment that forms part of the process of nationalism is important to understand. Literature and films that present alternative histories, despite being in the realm of ‘fiction’, open up a space in which those histories can be critically and creatively examined, and politically deployed. Accordingly, the films in this chapter (and indeed, in the entire thesis) are texts in which the film-makers, in different ways, hijack and appropriate the traditional narratives based around European presence in outback Australia, and present alternatives. As David Birch suggests, “myths and texts do not exist as autonomous entities; they exist as part of a much larger, universal scheme of things.”³⁴ The process of ‘telling’ history, then, is richly represented in fictional texts.

Given historical distance, and new, critical perspectives, it would seem we are well armed, and have in our arsenal the weapons to re-evaluate and reveal the excluded

³² R.J.Ellis, “American National Identity and the Structure of Myth: Images of Reagan” in *Readings in Popular Culture: Trivial Pursuits?*, ed. Garry Day (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1990): 216.

³³ Turner, 124.

³⁴ David Birch, *Language, Literature and Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1989), 131.

histories. This is correct to an extent, but as Barthes has claimed, “the mythical still abounds, just as anomalous and slippery, fragmented and garrulous.”³⁵ Discursive practices that perpetuate mythical identities are not confined to identities of the past. Turner makes this clear, asserting the importance of understanding that nationalism is not necessarily a nostalgic window into some mythical past, but rather is a discursive articulation of the present.³⁶ One cannot simply un-do the writing of history, however. Many of the ideological positions and discourses in popular socio-cultural circulation in Australia perpetuate and rearticulate ideas like nation and identity with increasing sophistication and fervor, in the face of sites of scepticism. The most striking example of this is, for me, is the bicentennial ‘celebrations’ of 1988. This event was regarded by many as the greatest moment in the nation’s history, and consequently those who spoke out with concern about the injustices and inequalities in the past and present were faced with the prospect of appearing un-Australian to those accepting the dominant reading of this event.

Cinema and Australian Identity – Walkabout and Wake In Fright

Many Australian films raise questions about the mythical Australian identity, but these questions are counterpointed by an industrial project of creating and screening that very identity. Public criticism of popular Australian films has commonly focused on the level of identification the viewer is able to reach with the characters, and the search for that essence of the uniquely and universally Australian character seems inherent in much cinema output. In the 1970s, an important phase commenced during which the archetype of the Australian male, and the rural myth, was the subject of

³⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 166.

³⁶ Turner, 123.

scrutiny and criticism for the film-making public (this is commensurate with, but not identical to the Australian Gothic phase), but this occurred at a time of unprecedented activity and excitement in the film industry, as the Government had decided to invest in 'Australian Culture'.³⁷ The 1970s revival began with a series of vulgar, soft porn films, but under increasing pressure from the Government to rekindle interest in an Australian identity, period films emerged whose production values were very much improved over the ocker comedies. However, according to Hutcheson, "[i]n an attempt to seek a national identity, the films played on stereotypes and myths of the Australian behaviour and turned back the clock to consider what it meant to be Australian."³⁸ In trying to produce films concerned with national identity, film-makers had returned primarily to rural settings around the turn of the century, and seemed focused on colonial heritage, despite the mistrust of the British influence that is apparent in many of these films.³⁹ In this period of production, a filmic longing for a mythical past can be clearly identified, and this ideal has come under increasingly sceptical investigation. Justine Lloyd has noted that "The wide-screen mythologizing of the Australian rural landscape in these films paralleled their exploration of questions of national and personal identity and place in Australia were held firmly in the past or the bush, and preferably both."⁴⁰ However, in these films, the bush myth appears more as a nostalgic daydream that is "anachronistic and evanescent".⁴¹

³⁷ Petra Strohmaier, "Metacriticism in Australian Film Reviewing in the 1970s", *Antipodes* 13 no.2 1999: 73.

³⁸ Tearlach Hutcheson, "Australian Cinema: Searching for a National Identity," *Antipodes* 10 no.1 1996: 40.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Justine Lloyd, "The Politics of Dislocation: Airport Tales" in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, eds Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 174.

⁴¹ Simmons, 60.

Stuart Moffat's approach to the dark aspects Australian landscape is primarily empirical, examining stylistic production techniques and the effect such things have on the narrative, as opposed to accounting for this 'darkness' in a theoretical manner.⁴² Moffat traces the dark film from the convict and settler narratives typical of the early twentieth century to contemporary films including *Chopper* (Dominik, 2000) and *The Boys*. For Moffat, the darkness present in filmic representations of Australian spaces and landscapes is as much an aspect of the mise-en-scene as it is of narrative. He alludes to the presence of a kind of social, or psychological darkness in much Australian cinema through an examination of the techniques of film-making commonly used. According to Moffat, "[t]he 1980s saw the landscape change to a place of bleak existence – a setting not only of despair but also of death. The sublime quality of the outback was overruled in favour of expressing nature as destructive and unpredictable."⁴³ Moffat is speaking of the increasing and distinctive trend in Australian film to assign even greater danger and unpredictability to landscape than had previously been evident. I would argue that this trend commenced in the 1970s move against overt nationalism in popular culture. Two films that appeared in the early 1970s that are exemplars of the kinds of text involved in a process of questioning identities are *Walkabout* (Roeg 1971) and *Wake in Fright*.

Walkabout is firmly grounded in the landscape, and the plot revolves largely around isolation and the difficulty of survival. The interaction of the characters with the landscape directly informs any attempt to understand their identity, yet the film is without a persistent male European-Australian character. The film sets up precisely the kind of opposition that bespeaks the problems of identifying any 'natural'

⁴² Stuart Moffat, "Into the Darkness: The Evolution of a Dark Film Style in Australian Cinema" (Hons. Diss., Murdoch University, 2001), 30.

⁴³ Ibid.

Australian identity, as two city-dwelling children are plunged into the uncertainty of the outback after their father attempts to murder them, then takes his own life. The film, in its very premise, establishes a seemingly insurmountable gulf between rural locations and urban identities. Jonathan Rayner argues that the importance of *Walkabout* is in the space it created in the Australian industry for films to develop alternative narratives to the ‘ocker’ comedies. He claims that the narratives and mise-en-scene of *Walkabout* and *Wake in Fright* “laid the foundations for the appearance of Australian Gothic in the remainder of the 1970s.”⁴⁴ Both these films, then, are seen as instigators of a stylistic and narrative trend that is underpinned by a desire to question and challenge ideas about the rural landscape, and those who inhabit it, in Australia.

Walkabout is heavily imbued with a sense of sexual repression, an undercurrent, which adds a distinctively voyeuristic edge to the narrative. By placing the children into a rural environment, it seems the girl becomes the object of a somewhat sinister spectatorial gaze as the narrative seems to be anticipating an arousal of base instincts over civilized behaviour in this environment. The sexual allusions in the film are apparently purified, however, in the final scene, when the girl, (now an adult), seems to remember the time spent with the Aboriginal boy as a natural and innocent experience. Dichotomies of nature and culture, and ideas about society and the repression of female sexuality are obscured and trivialized, as Jenny Agutter’s character stands in a kitchen preparing a meal in the closing scenes of the film. The sub-plot concerning the relationship of the girl with the young Aboriginal boy climaxes before this however, when the Aboriginal boy hangs himself in a tree after the girl fails to acknowledge his dance of courtship. This type of resolution is

⁴⁴ Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 25.

common for characters who fall short of achieving the lofty ideals of the mythical Australian, a situation that women and non-white characters are almost certainly doomed to occupy. The self-realization that characters must experience as they come to terms with their failure is pivotal, and, I would argue, is an intertextual motif that recurs throughout Australian cinematic production. In *Walkabout*, the moment of realization is a catalyst for the narrative, as the father violently commits suicide and strands the children.

Walkabout places emphasis on the distinction between European and Australian outside of the boundaries of the screen also. As an industrial product, it certainly points out the question of what an Australian film actually is, and how we might decide this. An English director, using American money, and a decidedly nostalgic, European outlook on the ‘noble savage’ all conspire against the ‘authenticity’ of the film as an Australian production. Despite this question though, the film remains sharply focused on the landscape, and the interaction of the characters with the landscape directly informs the understanding of them. I would suggest that the tension between European and Australian, from a production point of view, is played out in the narrative accordingly. The film is exploring the meeting of the two, representing an apparently necessary tension experienced by the culturally ‘civilized’ westerners in the face of an unforgiving environment.

In the absence of a direct articulation, the mythical male identity is implied and validated, primarily by the failure of all those characters who do not conform to his criteria. Michael O’Shaughnessy has claimed that “the film’s focus is the idea of a

lost paradise rather than on the construction of an Australian identity”⁴⁵. However, this is short sighted, as it presumes that the construction of identity necessarily involves the presence of the entity to which the identity belongs, when clearly, the mythical characteristics of the Australian bushman are articulated just as powerfully by absence as they are by presence. In claiming that in the absence of anyone who can conform to the mythical Australian identity, the construction of identity takes a secondary role to ideas about the landscape in and of itself, one underestimates the power of the landscape itself in forming particular kinds of identities.

Moffat claims that *Walkabout* is stylistically commensurate with many other landscape-based narratives of the 1970s, and asserts:

Largely due to the prolific use of anamorphic lenses and wide-angle lenses, settings could be represented as distorted hallucinatory wastelands of endless scrub. The power to transform and visually manipulate the on-screen space was apparent in many films that dealt with themes of desolation and despair.⁴⁶

Wake In Fright stands out, sitting menacingly above any other film mentioned in this dissertation, I would argue, for its grotesque and confronting examination of the vitriolic malice that flows beneath the myth of the male in the bush. The desolation and despair that Moffat mentions permeates the narrative, although not explicitly through imagery of the landscape. *Wake in Fright* begins and ends with the same shot of a remote settlement, but the power of this story is not located solely in the land, and indeed the land is not given a mystical aspect as it is in *Walkabout*. Simmons claims that *Wake in Fright* “reveals the Australian rural male as violent, drunken, corrupt, sexist and racist,”⁴⁷ and the oppositional relationships John Grant develops with almost every other character he encounters reveal that this Australian male identity is

⁴⁵ Michael O’Shaughnessy, “Walkabout’s Music: European Nostalgia in the Australian Outback”, *Metro* 140 (2004): 86.

⁴⁶ Moffat, 29.

⁴⁷ Simmons, 60.

a peculiarity of the location. Thus, the landscape, while not impacting on characters in the same manner as is evident in *Walkabout*, nonetheless reveals a sinister aspect in the kinds of identities it apparently demands.

At the moment John Grant dryly notes that suicide seems to be the most successful way of leaving ‘the ‘yabba’ (the local abbreviation for the outback town of Bundanyabba), the significance of the scathing critique communicated by this film starts to become clear. According to O’Regan, “*Wake* introduced the idea of endemic and structural evil to Australian Cinema,”⁴⁸ and the silence following Grant’s humourless joke is the point at which this structural evil begins to come into focus.

O’Regan continues:

It helped create – after the figure of New German Cinema’s ‘unmastered past’ – an unsavoury Australian past and present centred largely on the deeds, misogyny, limited horizons, and xenophobia of white (Anglo) males. Kotcheff’s film prepared the way for that mix of hyperrealism, excessive masculinity, ambiguous sexuality, and misogyny so insistently present in subsequent Australian cinema.⁴⁹

It seems, then, that the early 1970s mark a watershed for the way ideas about Australian identity would be subsequently expressed on screen. Albert Moran’s exploration of Government film, and in particular the claims he makes regarding the changes taking place from the 1970s onwards are worth mentioning here. Speaking of the transition of documentary and government film production during this period, he claims that “There was no longer any consensus on what was normal, what was Australian, what was truth.”⁵⁰ This is a claim that identifiably echoes through fictional film production of the period. *Walkabout* and *Wake in Fright* are, it would seem, the texts agreed upon as the instigators of a process of questioning, and specifically,

⁴⁸ Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 57.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Albert Moran, *Projecting Australia* (Paddington: Currency Press, 1991), 107.

questioning ideas about Australian identity. Moran ascribes this process to the changing cultural climate, suggesting that:

The various images of Australia that appeared in the late 1960s were of a pluralist society: heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, composed of many valid points of view rather than one correct point of view, populated by many different groups and individuals rather than one particular male Anglo-Saxon type to which all others should aspire.⁵¹

Previous assumptions about the unified nature of Australian identities, it seems, were the target for a new phase in both fiction and non-fiction film-making. Moran goes on to say, “much of the consensus that was implied in the 1970s has been replaced by a darker, diverse society in conflict.” The films of the early 1970s, then, were not solely concerned with interrogating the mythical Australian bushman. Inherent in this project is the desire to come to terms with both the failures of a traditional idea of national identity, and the need for a new ways of expressing of an increasingly diverse society. The films mentioned here deal with the mythical Australian identity in a variety of ways. There are key differences between the role the visual representation of the landscape plays in *Walkabout* and *Wake in Fright*, for example, but they share a common thread - which might be called a family resemblance - with each other and a number of other productions, and that is the notion of failure.

John Grant’s story is one of consistent failures: a failure to drink; a failure to act in an appropriate sexual manner; a failure to escape the ‘Yabba; and a failure to escape Doc Tydon. These experiences mark John as socially ineffectual, potentially homosexual, and most insidiously of all, decidedly un-Australian. Grant stands as a somewhat impotent and futile affront to the rural male, and the oppositions established between Grant and others provide dramatic impetus to the narrative. Within the critique of the

⁵¹ Moran, 109.

rural male that *Wake in Fright* articulates, there is the sense that Grant's arrogance, and the associated distance he keeps between himself and others, is in fact the very reason he cannot escape. During Grant's first night in the Yabba, 'Doc' Tydon tells him that "discontent is the luxury of the well-to-do", and this sentiment reveals the portion of the myth of Australia that accepts defeat. The nobility of hoping for nothing more than survival, comes into play.

The relationship between Grant and Tydon is obviously central to the narrative. The circumstances ultimately leading to Grant's suicide attempt result directly from the collapse of the tenuous differentiation Grant constructs between himself and Tydon, who is an educated man also. Tydon is aware of this precarious divide, and continually mocks Grant's intellectual manner. That Grant accepts a beer on the return train ride to Tiboonda is indicative of the change in his perspective, the realization that maintaining an essentially meaningless sense of being 'above' his predicament is doomed to failure. The film moves through a complex narrative path, but the resolution lies in acceptance, and surrender to the landscape, but more importantly, to the demands it makes on its inhabitants.

At points the narrative reveals an inner tension, as Grant is seemingly torn between the civilized life he imagines, and the brutality that he fleetingly finds comfort in. He very quickly becomes enamoured with the two-up game after winning. However, after taking his winnings to his room in the hotel, he comes across his English teaching books, and in a moment of pained decision leaves his books behind and returns to the two-up game, which results in the loss of his money, and of course begins his destructive journey. This is not the first time he will reject his books, as he oscillates

between desperately holding on to, and then abandoning, his 'civilized' aspirations. McCauley has suggested that Grant is subject to inner turmoil as a result of his repressed homosexuality.⁵² This again draws attention to the highly unstable opposition between Grant and Tydon, which is physically and metaphorically breached by the suggestion of sexual activity between the two. This event is the catalyst for Grant's eventual, albeit ineffectual breakdown. An attempt to kill Tydon turns into an intention to kill himself. The suicide attempt fails, and ultimately, John Grant has failed. I want to suggest that this journey is a kind of template for failed males, or at least for those who fail to live up to the mythical bush identity. Like many that follow, John Grant's journey does not end in success, emancipation, or enlightenment, but rather, resignation.

Wake in Fright is generally unambiguous about the characteristics that are important to the rural Australian male. An eerie moment of remembrance in the pub, the two-up game, the consistent, dizzying consumption of alcohol, the 'roo shooting, and the relationship between the males and Janette Heinz all direct attention to a stereotypical identity. During the uncomfortable drinking scene at the Heinz household, the apparent differences between Grant and the other men are polarized, as Grant instigates a conversation with Janette. As a failed man, he has no choice but to associate with Janette, as he is clearly out of his depth drinking with 'the boys'. "What's the matter with him? Rather talk to a woman than drink?" asks one of the men. While the men gamble and drink, John Grant is quoting poetry to Janette. He has tried to succeed as the men in the Yabba do, but has failed utterly.

⁵² McCauley, 207.

The Cars That Ate Paris, Sunday Too Far Away and Long Weekend

A great deal has already been written about *The Cars That Ate Paris*. It represents a series of intersections in discussions about Peter Weir's successful, yet enigmatic career, the 1970s revival, and the style of Australian Gothic films, to which he is a significant contributor.⁵³ *The Cars That Ate Paris*, like the other films mentioned here, is symptomatic of the trajectory shared by some directors during the 1970s away from the nostalgic bush myths and the traditional notions of a mythical Australian male, towards a malevolent and often nightmarish caricature of rural Australia. As has been mentioned, this is of interest here because this move occurred at a time when the Australian Cinema industry was actively pursuing a project of forming a national identity. Unlike the other films I am using as examples, *The Cars That Ate Paris* offers a distinctly more visually surreal experience.

Criticized for being inconsistently directed and not displaying much in the way of stylistic coherence,⁵⁴ *The Cars That Ate Paris* is a continuation of the exploration of the Australian identity arising from the landscape. Indeed, Saadi Nikro has suggested that the town of Paris, and the mechanisms within that attack, suppress and assimilate unsuspecting visitors is "an allegory, creatively responding to a dominant understanding of Australian history and identity."⁵⁵ Nikro's reading emphasizes the apparent irony of the project of multiculturalism in Australia, arguing that, in fact, anything counter to total assimilation is punished in the text. An analysis is constructed that places *The Cars That Ate Paris* as a kind of modern fable about the

⁵³ Rayner, 29.

⁵⁴ Marek Haltof, *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 15.

⁵⁵ Saadi Nikro, "The Self As Stranger: Re-viewing *The Cars That Ate Paris*," *Southerly* 61 no.1 (2001): 17.

always already doomed nature of attempts to hybridize multicultural societies. For Nikro, *The Cars That Ate Paris* concentrates on the issue of otherness in relation specifically to cultural hybridity and migration. Extending Nikro's argument, it can be said that the failure of the Paris community stems directly from the failure to successfully suppress and assimilate difference. Further, I would add that it is the failure of the qualities of mythical Australian identities in accommodating difference that acts as a catalyst. However, it is crucially important to note this failure leads inevitably to a strengthening of those identities, as "[s]tereo-typification of the other always involves stereo-typification of the self."⁵⁶

The opening sequence sees Arthur Waldo and his brother driving from town to town, amid scenes of desolation and economic ruin. This representation hails images and narratives of the itinerant workers of the depression, the unemployed men desperately scouring the country for a way through economic hardship. Arthur becomes stranded in the rural community of Paris, New South Wales, by a car accident that claims the life of his brother, and he comes to learn that the township survives on the proceeds of car crashes that are deliberately engineered on the roads surrounding the town. The constant stream of traffic, presumably resulting from the need to find work, provides sustenance for the town. The gruesome economy becomes less containable, and ultimately the town is itself consumed. The closing series of peculiar and carnivalesque images suggest that Paris has in fact been destroyed as a result of those cannibalistic consumption practices on which it relied. Tom Russo suggests "this is a world where the surreal passes for everyday, one whose mysteries never fully reveal

⁵⁶ Nikro, 15.

themselves to the viewer, let alone to the befuddled central character.”⁵⁷ *The Cars That Ate Paris* mobilizes a host of visual fractures in ‘normality’. Haltof calls this “eclectic visual style.”⁵⁸ Part of this visual style centres on the town’s population of bizarre, anthropomorphized vehicles. These vehicles, constructed by the town’s rebellious youths, using components salvaged from the continual flow of crashes, ultimately appear to be driverless, as the dark undercurrent of the town’s activities finally overpowers civil order.

Dermody and Jacka argue that Arthur is in fact a ‘pathological stereotype’⁵⁹, as indeed are the majority of the population of Paris. Each character displays deviation of some sort in their re-presentation of some established ‘genre’ characters. The mayor, the experimenting scientist/doctor and the chief law enforcement officer are probably the most visible of the characters in these terms, as they each demonstrate the mix of generic conventions that Weir utilizes and attempts to pervert. Arthur’s psychological impairment is the result of killing a pedestrian whilst behind the wheel. His failures dictate his relationships and his identity. His status as a man is removed initially through his failure to drive, and is then further removed as he becomes orphaned by the death of his brother, only to become a ‘son’ to the Mayor. Both his gender and adult status have been compromised by his weakness. He is a disenfranchised passenger until his emancipation in the final scene, when he kills the leader of the rebellious town youths. Only by taking the wheel, and killing, does he regain the identity that has been lost.

⁵⁷ Tom Russo, “The Far Side of Peter Weir’s World,” *Boston Globe*, Nov 16, 2003, 22.

⁵⁸ Haltof, 12.

⁵⁹ Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia volume 2: Anatomy of a National Cinema* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987), 51.

I would suggest that the Gothic phase of film-making was, in the 1970s, a specific kind of reaction against the Australian mythical identity, and the institutions and practices responsible for its dissemination. Rayner has argued that one of the thematic links between Gothic films is the sense of disillusionment with social reality.⁶⁰ I would argue that this claim resonates very broadly. This kind of disillusionment is a facet of a much wider cross section of Australian films, and is indicative of the lasting effect that narratives espousing acquiescence in the face of a hostile environment have had across a range of texts.

The process of Arthur's recovery from his fear of driving is typical of the journey of the male in much cinema of this type. His is not a path of hope or promise, but rather a series of frightening and apparently quite random experiences which lead eventually to his murderous act in the final scene. Arthur's path remains, for the most part, beyond his control or understanding. Drawing the narrative to a close with this sort of process is a key to the dark psychological aspect of the Gothic in Australian Cinema, and further, demonstrates something of the futility of will. Geoff Mayer surmises that Gothic displays "little or no faith in the ability of people to transcend or transform their everyday world", leading to the kind of narrative climax such as is evident in *The Cars That Ate Paris*, where the protagonist is caught in a "conflict" and "contradiction".⁶¹

Parallel climaxes are rife in Australian features during, and since, the 1970s. These range in execution from *Summerfield* (Ken Hannam, 1977), in which a murder-suicide situation finally 'settles' the narrative of incest and secrecy (while nonetheless leaving

⁶⁰ Rayner, 25.

⁶¹ Geoff Mayer, "Australian Gothic To Have and To Hold," *Metro* 109 (1997): 95.

several key narrative strands unanswered), through to *Tom White* (Alkinos Tsilimidos, 2004), which traces the decline experienced by a failed architectural draughtsman through a series of disconnected and almost random relationships. Nikro argues that:

As an exploration of strangeness (unanticipated otherness, otherness of the self) is irredeemably woven into the fabric of Australian forms of culture and social life, the film takes us beyond any binary frame of reference that presupposes a simplistic division between 'us and them'.⁶²

This othering of the self, I would argue, is a crucial observation. Many narratives trace a decline in physical or mental wellbeing in the face of different kinds of self-realization, and I have covered some instances of that here. Challenges to, or questions about, a mythical Australian identity in film rest on those narrative events in which the male character becomes aware of their failure, or their difference from an ideal.

An entirely different kind of film to those mentioned thus far is Ken Hannam's *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975). It is an apposite example of the kinds of undercurrents that are the preoccupation of this project. The film traces a series of events that force gun shearer Foley (Jack Thompson) to re-evaluate his own identity. His status as protagonist is not completely unequivocal, and the sexism, homophobia, alcoholism and violence that seems to run beneath the surface for all of the shearers finds its way to the surface most directly through Foley's actions.

The narrative itself covers little ground, and appears to be somewhat random, but the apparent ordeal - the process of self-realization that is common to so many males in Australian narratives – that Foley endures touches on a number of concerns that are centrally important to the identity of the mythical Australian male. Foley's team of

⁶² Nikro, 17.

shearers clearly represents the stages of his own life. The death of Garth, a character who has a lot in common with Foley, illustrates the fragility of Foley's situation, and forces him to form questions about his own future, and, presumably, his past. Foley's attitude towards those things in which he previously took great comfort shifts, as he realizes the extent of his own failure. The importance of shearing the highest number of sheep in a day is pivotal to his identity, yet when confronted with the death of Garth, it appears that base on which Foley was standing is not as stable as he imagined.

Sunday Too Far Away perpetuates many character traits consistent with the mythical Australian identity. There is a distinct mistrust of authority (and the wealthy), the men are crudely egalitarian, staunchly group-minded, and are most definitely working class. However, as mentioned, these supposedly laudable characteristics are undermined by alcoholism, violence, sexism and homophobia. The shearing shed is clearly a male domain; the presence of the owner's daughter is not acceptable to the men. Her looks of incredulity as the men shear (accompanied by an unusually disjointed, yet suspenseful musical soundtrack) clearly demonstrate her alienation from this male domain. She is simultaneously above and beneath the men, and her appearance throughout the film remains somewhat ambiguous. The film is simply unable to account for her in a consistent manner, and indeed the narrative demonstrates the superfluous position held by females during the scene in which a shearer is found by Foley and the others writing to his wife, and is, oddly enough, heckled by the men, and called 'a queer'. Foley's sometimes bizarre interaction with Sheila is further evidence that, for all intents and purposes her actual identity is irrelevant. She could literally be any woman, as, perhaps, her name suggests. Sheila is

a character of contrast, providing the necessary psychological backdrop to Foley's own struggles, yet remaining absolutely detached, as, both physically and metaphorically, a woman cannot be 'allowed in', and her appearance routinely reinforces her status as a necessary, but intrusive accessory to Foley's experiences.

Ultimately Foley's path through the narrative is one of acceptance and the typical, cheerful yet melancholy resignation demanded of the mythical Australian. He seems to submit to fate, rather than attempting to maintain what he realizes, as a result of his various conflicts, is an illusory control over his circumstances. Turner argues that "definitions of national identity are sites of struggle; the definitions are never static or 'fixed'."⁶³ I suggest that this claim accounts for the way individual iterations of national identity function, such as that of the character of Foley. His identity is established primarily in the face of adversarial struggles with his employers, his peers, with women, and with himself. These struggles contained within a narrative play out aspects of larger scales of struggle over meaning, significance, and identity.

Long Weekend (Colin Eggleston, 1979) takes a step away from the tactics of *Walkabout* and *The Cars That Ate Paris*, by pitting not only urban against rural, but by setting the apparent will of nature directly and malevolently against the holidaymaking interlopers. The relationship between human and environment is decidedly adversarial for the entirety of the film. *Long Weekend* also differs in that the journey of the male character is one that takes him from an urban to a rural setting quite deliberately, as opposed to by a series of misfortunes. He is literally acting out

⁶³ Turner, 110.

the nostalgic desire for the return to the bush, with a car full of camping equipment, alcohol and weapons.

The tension between the characters and their environment is synchronous with their relationship. It is a troubled marriage, and resolving the conflict that appears to be persistently bubbling beneath the surface is a project that seems to be entwined with their fate while camping. Initially, as Peter arrives home before they set off, he tests the sight on his new gun by aiming it at Marcia. As Marcia potters around the house she seems dazed, and disconnected from her surroundings, staring blankly at a frozen chicken, and idly closing curtains in broad daylight. The film develops a distinct sense of unease about the both the relationship and the camping trip. This unease is fostered by the unusual drive to the camping location, stories of UFOs on the radio, and the unusual stop at the roadhouse during which the locals seem to have no idea of the existence of the supposedly well-known camping spot. At first, it seems as though the (human) locals may in fact present the greatest threat to the couple, as they ogle the woman through the windows of the shop. It is implied that the locals know of the dangers of the region, and the fact that the camping spot is near a slaughterhouse adds to the feeling that the film seems to be an attempt at a dark ecological fairy tale, and it is far from subtle in the oppositions it establishes.

The camping trip ultimately claims both Peter and Marcia's lives, as they are punished for their 'crimes' against nature, and presumably, each other. *Long Weekend* poses questions about the way the characters interact with the environment, and offers clear links between this interaction and establishing an idea of who they are. Peter seems desperate to escape the city for the simplicity of a weekend on the beach, yet

carries with him a substantial supply of tools, alcohol and weapons. Marcia, in contrast, seems reluctant to leave the comfort of the home at all. She is therefore almost entirely unprepared for the ensuing events, although she is demonstrably no worse off than Peter, who finds his tools are totally inadequate, as he fails to control the environment or his relationship with Marcia.

Very little information is offered initially, and only after a few scenes does it become apparent that the natural environment seems to be administering retribution for Peter and Marcia's previous wrongdoing, a 'crime against nature' in the form of an aborted pregnancy that was the result of an affair. Overt moralising appears close to the surface of the narrative, to the extent that Marcia consistently hears a baby crying during moments of quiet. However, the incidents that befall Peter and Marcia reveal, in small portions, information that suggests they are somehow victims of circumstance, despite their crime. They are never given any real power over their situation and are subjected to apparently random misfortunes: a spear gun discharges while the safety catch is on, a dugong apparently tries to attack Peter, along with an eagle, and Marcia destroys the eagle's un-hatched egg, apparently echoing the trauma of her own abortion. Turner observes that "assertion of the conflict between Australians and their natural environment occurs in a surprising number of films made during the 1970s revival"⁶⁴. Turner, here, is highlighting the apparent deference of all human action to the power of the landscape, and in this instance the deference is not so much the reluctant submission seen in the other narratives, but rather it is forcefully and fatally ensured by a decidedly malevolent, natural force of retribution.

⁶⁴ Turner, 29.

Peter and Marcia cannot reach an agreement, either with themselves or with nature, and this failure catalyses their undoing.

In contemporary cinematic articulations, the mythical Australian, a cornerstone of everything good and natural about Australia (if we believe the rose-tinted view of Phillip Knightley) appears, it would seem, to be lost in the outback. He is alienated and isolated through unfamiliarity, displacement and circumstance. He dwells uncomfortably in a cycle of violence, alcohol and terror, and even more terrifying than this, he is at the whim of what seems to be some sort of innate madness in the landscape, a random nature to all things and people in these environments. Isolation permeates many narratives that present men who are not pioneers, are not resourceful, are not successful and most importantly, are not in any way 'in charge' of the environment. Boyle sums up this new relationship between man and nature as follows:

The polarization of the sexes and the anomie of men are somehow attributed to Nature, which is terrifyingly beautiful and unpredictable. Nowhere are the haunting influence of Australian landscape on character and action more apparent than in the films of Peter Weir. In classics like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *The Last Wave* (1977), he portrays nature as a palpable force, alternately menacing, spiritual, sexual, and implacable.⁶⁵

Australian narratives dealing with the isolation, alienation and degradation of the male identity, from *Wake In Fright* through to *Dogwatch* (McInnes, 1999), represent an idea that is in every way, absolutely counter to the mythical Australian. The Australian male of this world is unpredictable and random, violent, generally drunk, dangerously uneducated and almost totally devoid of any kind of loyalty, egalitarianism or honour - qualities so commonly associated with identity myths like

⁶⁵ D.Boyle, "A Blizzard of Oz" *The Village Voice*, Oct 31, 1995, 84.

the digger or the bushman. However, rather than serving as a counter-example to the mythical identity, these representations, in as much as we measure them against the 1890s legend, serve to reinforce the qualities of the bushman. The challenge here is not to see these males as oppositional, but rather, as one and the same.

Wake in Fright demonstrates the failure of a man who cannot live up to the expectations of the rural environment. John Grant is demarcated explicitly and without ambiguity by his differences from the typical and mythical characteristics of the Australian rural male. *Sunday Too Far Away*, with more subtlety, represents the failure of that very Australian rural male. Indeed, all the films I have mentioned offer narrative explorations out of which arise a family resemblance of sorts, an undercurrent, which I would argue is the motif of failure. Ceaselessly though, the intimation of the mythical Australian rises out of these narratives, as they are appropriated as ‘Australian’ stories. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, much Australian cinema seems to participate in an unspoken project of finding that ideal Australian, and each narrative of failure, through the purification of the process of mythologising, seems to somehow, amazingly, fall into line with an overall trajectory towards the construction of a national identity. Talking specifically of *Wake In Fright*, Simmons concludes on a disappointingly short-sighted note, claiming that “the bush myth will recede as our differences and similarities are celebrated.”⁶⁶ This is demonstrably unsupportable however, as differences are seldom celebrated, and similarities are routinely couched in the project of assimilation inherent in the identity of a mythical Australia. The bush myth clearly has not receded despite the increasing diversity of nationalities present in contemporary Australian communities. The myth

⁶⁶ Simmons, 63.

is able to subsume difference, demanding assimilation and acquiescence rather than celebrating diversity.

Chapter Three - Destabilizing the Social



Bad Boy Bub (Rolf de Heer, 1993)

Australian cinema, as a national cinema, relies on the social dimension of everyday lives, and even generic horror and science fiction productions relate more directly to the personal and interpersonal rather than the public.¹ If it is taken as a given that national cinema, by its nature, communicates through discourses of social problematization, then it offers significant insight into the types of malevolence, decay, and anxiety that operate within larger systems of signification of a culture, by revealing those undercurrents of social dis-ease. There is no question that a great deal has been written and discussed concerning the ‘social issues’ film in Australia; a consequence of this kind of film being the primary trope of national cinema.² Tom O’Regan claims that this is a necessity of national cinema industries, as their capacity for production is relatively limited, meaning that texts lend themselves to modest, social, and “human proportions.”³ Elizabeth Jacka agrees, claiming that “[w]hen Australian cinema does register the dislocations of contemporary life, it is on the personal level.”⁴ There is something appealing in this dimension of Australian national cinema for the sites of popular memory whose network of relationships inform the ‘battler’ ideology. The struggles played out on screen are simultaneously personal and public, and it could be argued that the entirely un-cosmetic, gritty, and highly realistic local narratives offer some hope that *vox populi* is relevant in a national cinema that bears the ideological weight of Hollywood in its distribution networks, however flawed such a notion might actually be.

¹ Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 261-262.

² See O’Regan, 261-287; Elizabeth Jacka, “The AFC Genre and Social Realist Film in the 80s,” in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian film in the late ‘80s*, eds. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, (North Ryde: AFTRS, 1988), 81-97; Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia Volume 2: Anatomy of a National Cinema* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1998), 39-43, and Debi Enker, “Australia and the Australians,” in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 211-225

³ O’Regan, 261.

⁴ Elizabeth Jacka, “Australian Cinema: An Anachronism in the 1980s?” in *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian cultural and media studies*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), 120.

This chapter interrogates the significance of the sub/urban distinction, and how the suburban landscape informs the ‘social issues’ film in Australia in both physical and semiotic ways. Moving through some theories of the origin and importance of suburbs, the chapter establishes ‘suburbia’ as an ideological space, and an actual place, and the tension implicit in this relationship. There is something of a critical polarization in regard to the merit of suburbia, and I will identify some theories of the suburban landscape that are both derisive and supportive of the potential value of critical inquiry into such. The textual analyses in this part of the thesis concern a small range of films that represent the varying ways that Australian cinema has interacted with the multitude of problems associated with suburban living, and the chapter also engages with characters who deviate from those identities that the myth of suburbia seems to desire. The subsequent estrangement and alienation from the ‘benefits’ of the suburban experience form part of this analysis also. The films I have chosen to include are not terribly indicative of the ‘social issues’ text, if such a cohesive group exists. Nor, in fact, are they particularly representative of the definition Dermody and Jacka offer below. However, I have chosen to look at these films as they are texts that engage powerfully with the discourses, and ideological suggestions that surround the suburban experience, which forms, I would suggest, the basis for much of the narrative makeup of the ‘social issues’ genre and text.

The Social Issues Film and the Suburb

Dermody and Jacka formulated a basic definition of what they called ‘social realist’ films in the 1980s and I think it is useful to quote as a starting point. They assert that:

The defining characteristic of the group is the choice of subject matter, and the relatively plain, dramatised documentary treatment thought proper for such subject matter. The subject matter is either a ‘social problem’ defined by the

media and other discourses that construct the problem, or it is a socially oppressed individual or group [...] These films tend to validate their presentation of contemporary, usually urban 'reality' through a style which ranges from documentary-like [...] to well-constructed television style realism.⁵

Concentrating on films based firmly in the realm of the social everyday, this chapter examines instances of the disintegration, and destabilization, of the social and cultural formation of ideas of family and community organization within Australian culture (which of course, importantly, includes those representations and ideas formulated by the media, as Dermody and Jacka suggest), with a specific emphasis on a broad, unsettled human disposition implicit in the representation of the sub/urban realm in film. The focus will be the way in which the disruption of the social status quo, through which malevolent undercurrents are revealed, does not ordinarily involve a disruption to the mimesis of the films in question. I have included Ray Lawrence's *Bliss* (1984) in this chapter, and it is a clear exception to this idea. Subsequent chapters interrogate films in which the narrative disruption entails, in varying degrees, breakdowns in the conceptual schema of characters and viewers, whereas the interest of this section is contained entirely within the 'human proportions' of the social issues film, as a cultural artifact whose significance is found in proximity to the real, and the everyday.

As with the myth of the bush, covered in Chapter Two, there is an imagined location implicated by the narratives discussed hereunder. Social issues films are by no means limited to particular locales, as the primarily character-based narrative emphasis transcends geographic specificity. However, the texts I am particularly interested in here are those in which the background to the social context consists of some kind of

⁵ Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, eds, *The Imaginary Industry: Australian film in the late '80s* (North Ryde: AFTRS, 1988), 91.

tension between the ‘real’ and the imagined, shared location of the suburb, in much the same way the preceding chapter addressed the mythical outback. These narratives collectively imagine an urban and suburban experience, which, I argue, produces a distinct set of narrative and thematic tendencies that scrutinize undercurrents of social problematization and decay.

The Physical and Ideological Suburb

Chris Healy suggests that ‘suburbia’ is an ideological location that has been subjected to both derision and celebration, and that neither position is inherently more valid. He observes, for both criticism and affirmation, that the cultural articulations of the suburban experience rely on its status as an idea, rather than a real, physical space:

...suburbia does not possess a geographical location. Suburbia has been a way of identifying traces which are not, and perhaps never were, really present. Thus suburbia has been a way of thinking about other things [...] Suburbia names an imagined place which can hold together and enunciate a sometimes attenuated sense of self in the world.⁶

The formation of identity is tightly bound in widespread imaginings of place and space, and the meanings inscribed therein. Chapter Two explored ideas relating to the construction of a national identity through myth and fiction. In the “public enterprise”⁷ of national cinema, there is a tacit project of building national identities, in which texts unavoidably take part. However, this portion of the thesis is not about identity directly, but rather the way in which undercurrents of uncertainty - blurred, distorted and perverted identities - operate to emphasize differentiation and alienation from imagined locations such as the suburb, or the city. This alienation results in the

⁶ Chris Healy, Introduction to *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, eds. Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), xvii.

⁷ O’Regan, 46.

inability of characters to conform to personal, moral and legal practices and conventions validated by social and cultural discursive networks, which is perhaps the ultimate form of the attenuated sense of self that Healy discusses. Thus, issues of identity are implicit in narratives that represent destabilized social formations, centralising character 'abnormality' in the face of established, identifiable social regulations of the city and suburb, and calling these regulations into question. While this uncertainty of identity is often the fulcrum of social issues narratives, it is not so much the precise nature of that uncertainty that is of concern here, but rather its prevalence across a range of texts. Unlike the focus in Chapter Two - problematizing a specific group of male identities - I am tackling social issues films here to raise questions about the very possibility of coherent, conforming identities under the weight of such dominant, popular imaginings as 'suburbia'.

The presumed shared imagining and resultant significance of suburbia, as a physical and ideological location in western societies, has long been a preoccupation of social critics and theorists. In the late 1960s, sociologist Bennett M. Berger produced a treatise on the then burgeoning landscape of American suburbia, noting that the word itself carried a variety of mythical connotations that in reality seemed unsupportable. His statistical examination of suburban populations revealed they were far from the upwardly mobile, socially active and civic-minded populations that had been presumed and mythologized through popular cultural discourse.⁸ The myth of suburban life, as a site of prosperity and community strength, was patently not commensurate with the reality of affordable tract housing. The distinct sense that beneath the often polished veneer of suburban life, there is a deep-seated social decay

⁸ Bennett M. Berger, *Looking for America: Essays on Youth, Suburbia, and other American Obsessions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), 168.

at work is clearly not a new discovery. Astonishingly though, after insinuating this very idea, Berger goes on to make the claim that that suburbia should *not* be considered a “citadel of standardization and vulgarization,” but should instead be considered a sign that the quality of life for ‘average’ Americans was higher than ever before.⁹ Temporal, contextual, and geographical distance from Berger’s claims perhaps make them difficult to view meaningfully in terms of the critical position I take up below, but I have raised them in order to discuss the way that suburbia, as an imagined place, relates to the social experience of those living in suburbs, as a ‘real’ place, in Australian narratives. Healy explains that suburbia has been described as “a middle landscape, as a ‘place’ that is forever in between.”¹⁰ It is this ‘middle’ space that is of interest here, because suburbia, as an idea, insidiously articulates a range of assumptions and differentiations of gender, class, ethnicity, and, as Berger’s stance indicates, the personal and public aspirations of suburban dwellers.

The suburb, historically, seems to be regarded primarily as a formation of social organization, specifically, the institutionalized stratification of class and gender. Chambers argues that the suburb is “a material and cultural expression of the ideology of feminine domesticity: woman as homemaker.”¹¹ Interestingly, Chambers notes that the desire for suburban life springs from the both the ideological and physical location. The suburb is “in the margins between nature and culture, between perilous city and perilous bush, where a former periphery is colonized and tamed as centre.”¹² For Chambers, the suburb is a signifier of a particular, patriarchal utopia – the suburban dream. Hartley spells out the social dimensions of suburbia that have,

⁹ Berger, 161.

¹⁰ Healy, xvii.

¹¹ Deborah Chambers, “A Stake in the Country: Women’s Experiences of Suburban Development,” in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, 88.

largely, been the subject of derision. Politically, economically, environmentally, socially, sexually, aesthetically, spiritually and philosophically, suburbia has borne the collective derision of those who have seen fit to make comment.¹³ These criticisms routinely return to the popularized vision of a 1950s paradise, in which the woman maintains a spotless and productive home, the patriarchal utopia of Chambers' comments, as these conservative ideas remain deeply woven into the fabric of suburbia. The perilous city to which Chambers alludes is echoed in the following passage from Alun Howkins. He documents arguments relating the origin of a part of the ideological tension generated between urban and rural identities, in relation to the theories of Social Darwinists. He writes:

Put simply, these argued that 'natural selection' worked, within a proletarian urban environment, to emphasize what was 'worse' in human development. The products of the city became puny in stature, unable to do hard manual work, and 'devious or cunning' in their attitudes to life.¹⁴

This relates to a British context, but is generally applicable as a way of expressing, and perhaps restating, the ideas outlined in Chapter Two relating to the myth of the Australian type prevalent at the end of the Nineteenth Century. The qualities associated with the rural 'type' are taken as inherently superior to those of the urban 'type', to postulate such a thing for the sake of this argument. Yet the suburban dweller does not occupy the rural zone, so as Chambers has suggested, the suburb exists within the binary opposition between city and country – a physical and metaphorical separator.

The evolution of suburbia as a 'real' and 'imagined' space is the result of many intersecting discursive practices, cutting across the interests of a broad range of

¹³ John Hartley, "The Sexualization of Suburbia," in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 184-186.

¹⁴ Alun Howkins, "Rurality and English Identity," in *British Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kevin Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 148.

academic disciplines. Suburbia, as a geographical location in which the personal lives of a significant number of people actually take place, has been constituted, in the main, by 'official' discourses. Industrial and discursive regulation of town planning, particularly in relation to 'zoning' practices, is a major and perhaps inadvertent contributor to the 'idea' of suburbia as an imagined place. In particular, women have been zoned along with suburban spaces; placed as an integral part of the everyday experience of 'home.'¹⁵ The imagining of suburbia in this country can be seen as the result of a broader system of ideas involved in the categorization and containment of the roles of men and women in post-war Australia. Of course gender politics are not the sole consideration, but the importance of the effect of formalising domestic practices through 'official' institutional practice (by such bodies as Town Planning departments), in terms of the presumed appropriate locations for men, women, and children, cannot be overstated in relation to narratives of isolation and alienation experienced by the suburban Australian. The consequences of institutional and discursive planning practices in the 1950s are present in many of the narratives to be examined here. The separation of home and work spaces, the sexual division of labour implied by the gendering of activities such as shopping, and entertaining, are intrinsically part of the geographical organization of suburban spaces. Margo Huxley examines these spaces in relation specifically to insidious networks of power that result from planning practices and the geographical regulation of gender roles. Importantly though, the regulation of spaces is a corollary with the regulation of behaviour, and the expectations placed on suburban dwellers is another important consideration. The range of theoretical perspectives that emphasize the gendered

¹⁵ Margo Huxley, "Planning as a Framework of Power: Utilitarian Reform, Enlightenment Logic and the Control of Urban Space," in *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, eds. Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 166-167.

organization of suburban space after the Second World War are as historically circumscribed as the totalising notions of suburbia to which they relate. Sprawling suburbs are now, I suggest, involved in the discursive circulation of a very different set of signs and practices. The ‘suburban dream’ of the male in the 1950s is patently anachronistic, yet the ideas invoked continue, obviously, to resonate, even in fictional texts concerned with a demonstrably dystopic view of the suburb and its inhabitants.

The idea that suburbs are a place of regulation of both space and action is a point that is refigured and crystallized in the following passage from Hartley:

Contemporary suburbia is the physical location of a newly privatized, feminized, suburban, consumerized public sphere. But suburbia is itself a diffused and dislocated phenomenon (i.e. not tied to a regional location, but generalizable even across continents). Nevertheless the home and suburb, together with their associated institutions (shopping centre, family, media) and practices (dressing and congregating; looking, listening and talking), constitute the place where and the means by which public, political knowledges are not only circulated and consumed but recreated, generalized and personalized.¹⁶

Suburbia, then, as an imagined location, informs a set of discursive networks and practices. Not only is this a shared geographical and socio-political location, it is a set of acquired practices, placing its requirements on the social bonds between its inhabitants. Hartley continues by suggesting that “...the virtual, semiotic sphere of culture both generates and cohabits within the physical, architectural space of suburbia.”¹⁷ The bipartite nature of interaction between the suburban home as actual place, and the multitude of social and cultural ideas attached to the signs of suburbia, is central to establishing a resistive aspect to the suburban ‘experience’, as both a subject of cultural studies, and a narrative preoccupation present in Australian filmmaking. The important point here is that those overarching systems of signification,

¹⁶ Hartley, 182.

¹⁷ Ibid., 183.

the intersections between discourses that ‘produce’ the gendered reproduction of space, the sexual division of labour, and class and ethnic distinctions, are also constituted at the level of the individual home, and consequently, are open to reinterpretation and appropriation in a resistive manner. Fiona Allon argues that as “a microcosm of everyday life, the home is a ‘meeting place’ that reveals, in a concentrated and often idiosyncratic manner, the social and political themes of a broader ideology.”¹⁸ The idea of incorporation and reproduction of socially and culturally defined assumptions into a private place is powerful and revealing, and the dynamic nature of the private home in Australian cinema, I suggest, functions to critique the very systems from which it is constituted.

The Suburb as a Site of Resistance

The struggle between dominant meanings and resistive strategies is encapsulated by Homi Bhabha. In speaking of the American suburban experience, he claims:

There is a culture war going on that seeks to ‘suburbanize’ the soul of America. Its agenda is traditional and conservative; its buzzwords are predictable – ‘family values’, ‘opportunity society’, ‘individual responsibility’, ‘free market’, ‘the work ethic’.¹⁹

Bhabha’s point is illuminated convincingly by this suggestion made by Fiske, Hodge and Turner, who see the contradiction between suburbia as an idea and as a place as potentially not as problematic as many consider it to be:

The divergence between hard figures and semiotic forms, however, is not an irreconcilable contradiction. It is precisely on occasions when a fundamental institution is most under threat that it will most insistently project images of

¹⁸ Fiona Allon, “The Nuclear Dream: Lucas Heights and Everyday Life in the Atomic Age,” in *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, eds. Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 50.

¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, “Postscript: Bombs Away in Front-Line Suburbia,” in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 298.

harmony and control, in order to legitimate itself and reconstitute its former basis.²⁰

This very tension has been examined, albeit in relation to the role of suburbia in the formation of musical subcultures in London, by Roger Silverstone, who uses the phrase ‘cultural battleground’ to describe the suburban environment.²¹ Clearly, there is an identifiable cultural tendency towards subordination and regulation in relation to the network of socio-cultural practices that generate and articulate ‘the suburb’ as an idea and place. Nonetheless, in an Australian context, struggles over identity and socio-political meanings occur both in spite of, and as a result of, the organization of discourses surrounding the urban, suburban and rural. Elizabeth Jacka aligns the idea of ‘the local’ with that of ‘everyday life’. She claims that:

The local has the potential to be surprising, shocking, uncontrollable, and thus ultimately subversive or oppositional. Paradoxically, the most familiar things can be surprising or even shocking if never before represented.²²

Catherine Simpson also suggests that suburbia is far from being an ‘inbetween’ that is devoid of significance:

...perhaps it is exactly this ‘inbetweenness’, this strange indefinable space between the inner-city and the country, which makes suburbia, and the characters who inhabit it, so fascinating. In recent times, rather than expressing suburbia’s worthlessness, sterility and hostility *ad nauseum*, there is more interest in representing a sense of its strangeness [...] Australian suburbia is a bizarre, mysterious and even threatening place - but far from aesthetically empty.²³

Australian films negotiate a path through the tension between the idea and the place by mobilising the bizarre, the shocking, the subversive, the oppositional, and the everyday.

²⁰ John Fiske, Bob Hodge, and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 51.

²¹ Roger Silverstone, Introduction to *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 25.

²² Elizabeth Jacka, “Australian Cinema: An Anachronism in the 1980s?” in *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian Cultural and Media Studies*, ed. Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), 118.

²³ Catherine Simpson, “Suburban Subversions: Women’s Negotiation of Suburban Space in Australian Cinema,” *Metro* 118 (1999): 24-25.

I want to draw a slightly off-centre comparison here, and suggest that the social issues film, particularly those participating in the mise-en-scene of Australian suburbia can, ironically, suggest thematic concerns very close to those of the Australian road movie, which, it has been suggested, is involved in “celebrating the positivities of isolation and rhapsodising alienation.”²⁴ In the discussion that follows it is established that there is an identifiable trend of alienation and isolation within suburbia that is not explicitly represented as a negative aspect of the story. While I would hardly use the word ‘rhapsodising’ to describe these circumstances, I suggest that the parallels are significant enough to warrant a claim for the similar outlook. The idea that alienation and isolation can be seen as ‘positivities’, comes largely from a desire, among characters in suburban narratives, to break free from the apparent drudgery of the suburban life in which they are, almost universally, presented as trapped.²⁵

Alison J. Clarke suggests that suburbia has long been held as a site of conformity, of consumption and of standardization. “Mass consumption and material culture in suburbia are judged, implicitly, as embodiments of alienation. [...] False consciousness and the increasing consumption of goods stand as commonly ascribed conditions of suburban living.”²⁶ In contrast to this view of suburban living, Fiske, Hodge and Turner suggest that “as a mass medium, housing is more directly responsive to the intentions and meanings of its users than is the case with most other

²⁴ Rama Venkatasawmy, Catherine Simpson, and Tanja Visosevic, “From Sand to Bitumen, from Bushrangers to ‘Bogans’: Mapping the Australian Road Movie,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 70 (2001): 78.

²⁵ Examples of this kind of film include *The FJ Holden* (Thornhill, 1977), *Emoh Ruo* (Lawrence, 1985), *Fran* (Hambly, 1985), *The Year My Voice Broke* (Duigan, 1987), *The Big Steal* (Tass, 1990), *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (Armstrong, 1992), *Radiance* (Perkins, 1998), *Idiot Box* (Caesar, 1998), *Mullet* (Caesar, 2001), *Thunderstruck* (Ashton, 2004), *Tom White* (Tsilimidos, 2004) and *Three Dollars* (Connolly, 2005),

²⁶ Alison J. Clarke, “Tupperware: Suburbia, Sociality and Mass Consumption,” in *In Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 143.

mass media and forms of popular culture.”²⁷ The home itself represents the smallest and most concrete aspect of suburbia, as myth and imagined location, and as Fiske, Hodge and Turner suggest, involves a network of signs and oppositions, and further, a way to “come to a point of balance where the threat inherent in all contradictions is temporarily defused.”²⁸ They refer, here, specifically to the oppositions between nature and culture, and private and public. I have engaged with Healy’s suggestion that suburbia is more an ideological than physical location, but this does not necessarily underplay the role of the suburb as an actual physical place, and one that represents the tension between the very real opposition of nature and culture, for example.

I have suggested, following the lead of several theorists, that the suburban home is indeed something of a half-way house. Physically, the suburb tends to form a ‘buffer-zone’ around business districts and entertainment precincts, and within sub/urban landscapes, there is a socially identifiable, if anecdotal, divide between the city and the suburb. However, most of the theories of Australian suburbia are rooted in British or American histories, and this presents a problem. Stronger than the city/suburb dichotomy is the city/country divide, and I would argue that owing to Australia’s very high level of urbanization, the signifying practices of the city and the suburb are so close as to make little difference. While I live in a suburb some kilometres away from the Perth business district, and therefore not in ‘the city’, if asked where I live by anyone outside of Western Australia, my response is invariably ‘Perth’, and I find that those people I communicate with in other states perform the same identification with their capital city. The high level of urbanization in Australia results in the capital city

²⁷ John Fiske, Bob Hodge, and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

becoming a metonym for the entirety of the metropolitan area. Of course, the connotations of 'inner-city' living operate within a network of meanings that are indeed different from suburban living, but my point here is that the city/country dichotomy sits above, perhaps even negates, in some circumstances, the city/suburb divide in Australian cinema.

Whatever the critical disposition, it is very clear that the suburbs, as both a geographical and imagined location, are most definitely a fertile ground for cultural investigation. A good portion of this project deals with the fear of that which dissolves distinctions between 'us' and 'others', that which emphasizes the extraordinary in the ordinary. The suburban experience is largely the 'ordinary' experience, and is of critical importance to this study, and to Australian Cultural Studies in general, I would argue. The unrelenting and derisive critical accounts of suburbia have often failed to take into consideration any resistance to the negative facets of suburbia, as both an idea, and a highly regulated organization of actual living space, that may come from within. Fiske, Hodge and Turner, who have championed many of the banalities of Australian culture as sites of fertile struggle over meaning, suggest that "[o]ne can see the very conformity and predictability of houses in our suburbs as actively and explicitly repressing hierarchical class distinctions." This suggests that the myth of Australians as staunchly egalitarian is informing the physical landscape, as much as that landscape informs the myth, and this example, while perhaps a little superficial, indicates that the cyclical flow of meaning is crucial. The suburban landscape is on one hand banal, stiflingly conservative (particularly in relation to the regulation of gender), hybridising, and intolerant of difference, yet it also a site from which a network of private systems of signs form networks that can

be read as culturally significant. In essence, to think of the idea of suburbia as devoid of cultural merit, while perhaps intellectually defensible, is to underestimate the significance of the suburb as a real place:

If ‘imaginative’ or ‘creative’ are not words normally associated with a description of suburban living in Australia, that is due to the poverty of cultural analysis of the society to date and inability to even hint at the reasons why most Australians make sense of their lives within that most maligned of environments, suburbia.²⁹

Further, much like critical perspectives on horror films to be examined in Chapter Four, it is in the collapse of polarizations that the struggle over meaning occurs, and these polarizations are not simply those for which the suburb occupies an inconsequential ‘inbetweenness’. The space inbetween the imagination of suburbia (as a cultural discourse and set of social regulations) and the suburb (as a real place of streets, houses and people) is a perspective that the textual analyses in this chapter will consider as crucial in understanding the way Australian films relate to the lived experience of Australian places.

Social Decay and Australian Cinema

Ben Goldsmith has recently called the social realist films a reaction to the “post-quirky crime comedies.”³⁰ His suggestion hints at a seriousness of perspective and implication in these narratives. Brian McFarlane has previously expressed a similar idea. He states: “[u]rban life and the *milieu* which produces it have not elicited the elements of the romantic or the epic one finds still in those films set in rural landscapes.”³¹ These are films, then, that valorize the ordinary, representing,

²⁹ Fiske, Hodge and Turner, 52.

³⁰ Ben Goldsmith, “Interrogating Identity: Tom White,” *Senses of Cinema*, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/34/tom_white.html (accessed August 5, 2005).

³¹ Brian McFarlane, *Australian Cinema 1970-1985* (Richmond: William Heinemann Australia, 1987), 87.

presumably, a very realistic and intense disposition towards the drama of the everyday, the tensions, disappointments and failures of urban Australian life. Linked to this, O'Regan has argued that there is a hierarchy of particular socio-cultural differentiations, repeatedly forming the basis of social problematization narratives in Australian cinema, and that these differentiations are posited as significant by the network of industrial discourses surrounding film production.³² Australian cinema has historically demonstrated a clear predisposition towards establishing contrasts and conflicts between male identities, and in particular, identities formed through socio-geographical relationships. The following textual analyses represent something of an untidy cross-section of films that mobilize many of the theoretical concerns I have called upon. As stated, these films do not strictly belong to the 'social issues' or 'social realism' genres, but, by and large, illustrate the tendency towards meaningful representations of social concerns that these genres have been formulated to explain. As the critical uptake of suburbia has centred on both the suburb as an actual place and suburbia as an idea, the following films represent engagement with both the place, and the idea also.

The Night the Prowler, The Plumber, and Bliss

The Night the Prowler (Jim Sharman, 1979) is based around Felicity, a young woman living with her parents, who reports that she has been raped by an intruder into her bedroom. While she has, in fact, fabricated the assault, the film questions the responses to this incident of all the characters involved, pointing an accusatory finger squarely at the heart of upper middle class suburbia. Of more concern, it would seem, is not the attack, but rather the repercussions on the family's civilized lifestyle. The

³² O'Regan, 264-265, 285.

tension between characters escalates throughout the film as Felicity battles against an overbearing mother desperately trying to hold together a relationship between Felicity and a socially eligible man, and Felicity's own persistent memories of sexual abuse as a child.

Felicity's mental condition initially appears to deteriorate as the narrative advances, as she maniacally throws off the containment of the daytime world and explores the city by night. Her journey is ultimately one of emancipation, yet there is a consistent shadow cast over her mental health, and whether the events that we are watching are borne out of psychological problems, or whether they are the result of some perhaps rational hatred for the social order. Felicity's psychological condition never really becomes unclouded, despite the journey she takes, as the film engages with a range of stifled, corrupted sexualities, and re-emerging memories of the incestuous abuse.

In line with the suggestion I made regarding a certain thematic closeness between road movies, and narratives articulating suburban frustration, *The Night The Prowler* follows the 'degradation' of Felicity, and this process turns into something like a journey towards freedom. The film is split tellingly between day and night, and the night-time undercurrents encroach into the day throughout. Early in the film as Felicity prepares to write a 'Dear John' letter to her fiancé, in the wake of her experience with the 'intruder', she lifts up the lid of her school-style desk to reveal a reproduction of Edvard Munch's *Scream*. It is no mistake that beneath the surface of her perfectly ordered bedroom, the décor of which would suit a much younger girl, as opposed to a young woman, there is an image of this nature.

The film manipulates time through repeated flashbacks, changing with each instance, or revealing a little more information each time, demonstrating that Felicity's relationship with her parents, which serves as a narrative metaphor for the stifling surrounds of the suburbs, has acted something like a poison. She ventures further and further from her family home, and indeed her life, until the climactic scene in the film, in which she finds herself in a derelict old house, which she enters to find a similarly derelict old man. The house is a metaphorical parallel of her own. Normally a place of sanctuary, the house for Felicity has been a place of nightmares, yet in this disordered, nightmarish old house, Felicity appears to find a kind of sanctuary, a place that, through its derelict status, is physically and metaphorically removed from the ordered, supposedly serene suburban dwelling of Felicity's sexually predatory father and duplicitous mother. Further to this, inside the house she finds, ironically, a homeless old man. Felicity reaches a point of understanding here, saying "I knew him as well as I know myself," indicating the paradox of her dual life. The man dies shortly after, and it seems as though the death of this man indicates the death of the grasp that her past has over her.

The Night The Prowler makes use of assumptions about the family unit (and critiques the kind of attitudes to what is and is not appropriate behaviour for women) within well-ordered, middle class suburbs, and through the disorder of familial abuse, repudiates these assumptions directly and without mercy. Brian McFarlane provides this succinct description of this aspect:

The Night The Prowler impugns a stultifying middle-class urban culture [...] The sense of a large city's informing the thinking and lives of the heroine, 'liberated' by an assault that did not happen, and her family and friends, is quite powerfully felt [...] the film fleetingly suggests the potential terror of the city.³³

³³ McFarlane, 95.

Scott Murray offers a similar take on the film, suggesting that the movie is primarily about escape from the middle class, from what is essentially a suburban prison of middle class attitudes.³⁴

The Plumber (Weir, 1978) mobilizes the discord between being simultaneously in-place and out-of-place, and by doing so highlights a class distinction that forms the backbone of the narrative. Part of the *unheimlich* is based on the idea that there exists a secret that should have remained hidden.³⁵ When this secret comes to light, as it did for Felicity in *The Night The Prowler*, it has the effect of making one feel out-of-place, and in-place simultaneously. This is particularly useful for both *The Plumber* and *The Night The Prowler*, and in fact, for any narrative that involves a family home, given the literal translation of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.

The Plumber centres on an urban, married woman who is conducting research for her Master's degree. After a problem in the house, Jilly calls for a plumber, and as the work begins to drag on over some time, she feels more and more uncomfortable around the plumber. Questions start to arise concerning both the intentions of the plumber towards Jilly, and her own sanity, as it seems feasible at points that she is simply imagining the harassment. *The Plumber* is a film that recognizes the relationship between the home as a place of safety, and as a threat, quite powerfully. More importantly however, the film depicts the transgression into the educated, middle class, apartment lifestyle of Jilly, by the working class (presumably suburban) plumber. *The Plumber* represents a fracture between classes and locations. The

³⁴ Scott Murray, ed., *Australian Film 1978-1994: A Survey of Theatrical Features* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), 282.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Art and Literature*, vol 14, The Penguin Freud Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 345

tension played out between characters is indicative of the tensions between the urban and suburban, the middle and working classes.

It is never really clear whether or not the plumber is in fact to be trusted or not, and the narrative delays revealing any certain information by continually hinting at a good side to this character. There is the possibility that this character, who represents the banal, uneducated menace of the suburban sprawl, is in fact totally benign. As Jilly's bathroom becomes a dangerous distortion of itself, replete with exposed pipes, broken tiles and smashed fittings, it turns into the metaphorical location of tension between middle class Jill and the working class plumber, as the room manifests the crossover between the *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Further, the encroachment into the most private of household rooms suggests that the mixing of classes is akin to a personal violation.

Ray Lawrence's *Bliss* (1985) is a difficult film to summarize neatly, and is not entirely appropriate to the aims of this chapter. I am mentioning it here however, as it is, in many ways, a particularly abrasive attack on urban and suburban lifestyle in Australia, and the (predominantly consumerist) assumptions underpinning such. The meandering, pedestrian narrative tends to deflate the impact of the social satire that is at work, but the malevolence beneath the surface of *Bliss* is considerable. The visually surreal, morbidly black humour throws the narrative open for a voyeuristic look into almost total familial dysfunction. The story is narrated by Harry Joy, a middle-aged advertising executive, who, after a near death experience, mistakes his family life for Hell. He is disturbed by nightmares, hallucinations and paranoia, and in his increasing supposed mental instability, his hallucinations take on a decidedly sinister tone. He witnesses an imagined sex scene in a restaurant, followed by the impromptu

appearance of sardines from between his wife's legs. Cockroaches emerge violently from Harry's post-operative wounds, and a Nazi uniform appears on his son as his daughter performs fellatio in exchange for drugs (a very disturbing scene, oddly, to which Harry himself is not privy, suggesting a link between Harry's mistrust of the family home and the perspective of the viewer). The film turns into a sort of cinematic ode to abandoning the suburban life in favour of living closer to nature towards the end, but I think this is an important film in its representation of social bonds and boundaries, highlighting "the profound otherness of everyday activity, and the erratic nature of human judgement and perception."³⁶

Bliss portrays not just a flawed male lead, but a male character who socially speaking, is cripplingly flawed, at least temporarily; a narrative elements that I would argue is an intertextual motif of many Australian films. In more recent films, we can see the same themes recurring. *Tom White* depicts the gradual degradation of an architectural draughtsman into a homeless man; *Idiot Box* (Caesar, 1996) presents a loss of order for a male character that eventually costs him his life. *Bad Boy Bubby* (de Heer, 1993) works with the same ideas, but refashions the dysfunctional male into a functional male, subverting the notion of suburbia as a trap or prison. The films I have examined so far are all at least twenty years old, and much has changed in the physical and social landscape of Australia in that time. However, the uncertainty of identity within the urban and suburban landscape remains a constant. Recently there have been a number of films that call this landscape into question, in one way or another, and there is an increasing sense that, in films like *Tom White*, despite the outcome ultimately restoring some sense of balance, the everyday experience of contemporary

³⁶ Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 34.

Australia is underscored by an indefinite, apparently unknowable (yet not invisible) and latent hostility. As established in the previous chapter, survival in the bush has frequently been represented in both fiction and non-fiction as necessarily dependent on acquiescence and acceptance, rather than victory. Accordingly, the urban experience is not significantly different. It seems there can be no victory in the face of increasing alienation among people (and increasing meaninglessness in the urban and suburban experience), only acceptance that life takes place in the face of some indefinable misanthropic malevolence that seems to lie, relatively unconcealed, beneath the veneer of 'city life'.

Tom White, Bad Boy Bubby, and The Boys

Recalling Chambers' comments about the location of the suburb between the dangers of the city and the bush, it is pertinent to note that the narrative of *Tom White* uses the river crossing as a metaphor of the separation between order and chaos, suggestive of the same kinds of danger in Chambers' distinction (where order is the suburbs, and chaos everywhere else). For the character of Tom White, a clear physical divide exists between the locations of his 'life' and the life he takes on after his breakdown.

Crossing the river is the physical and symbolic representation of the divide that motivates, and underscores the narrative arc. Indeed, the return journey on the same boat and river marks Tom's return to order, albeit of a slightly different kind. The literal physical movement across the water suggests the metaphorical movement from safety to risk.

The opening scenes are of a pristine suburban street, and the goings-on inside the house seem immediately familiar, as a family prepares for a day, which of course

seems to be just as any other. Yet this façade lasts only a few minutes. Tom begins talking to himself and notices his own hands shaking. His memory is clearly unreliable, and his behaviour erratic. He is an ageing, apparently unspectacular draughtsman, and finds his career compromised by the young, successful architect who seems to have ‘stolen’ his project. His ‘breakdown’ occurs rapidly, during the course of this one day, and what follows is a loose collection of episodic relationships, not entirely dissimilar to the trajectory in *Bad Boy Bubby*. The people he meets challenge the requirements of family structure, in one way or another, made by a middle class suburban landscape. These are all people who do not ‘fit’ in suburbia; a young gay man, an ex-junkie with whom he has a brief romantic entanglement, an older homeless man, and a teenager whose father provides for him through crime.

As Tom gradually moves further and further away from his life, and his ‘old identity’, he questions exactly who he is. The allusions to his face being his only identification, and that this is not enough (from the perspective of the hospital and police station where the issue is raised), are an important articulation of this disruption to the normal order. Nancy and James Duncan underscore their examination of suburbia with “the ideology of possessive individualism”. They make the important claim that “privately owned goods are markers of identity, even constitutive of identity.”³⁷ In this idea we can see something of the dilemma that a largely suburban society places on Tom, in as much as, without his suburban possessions, he literally is without identity. He announces, at one point in the film “I’m gonna look in the mirror one fuckin’ day and there won’t be anyone there.” This scene is immediately followed by the auction of

³⁷ Nancy G. Duncan and James S. Duncan, “Deep Suburban Irony: The perils of democracy in Westchester County, New York,” in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 164.

his house, suggesting that as the link to Tom's property fades, so does his identity.

Ben Goldsmith claims:

The film is [...] both an expression and an interrogation of the erosion of long-established (male) expectations of male behaviour which valued stoic endurance, rationalism and emotional coldness and viewed the recourse to professional counselling and the public expression of emotion as signs of weakness.³⁸

Presumably, for Goldsmith, Tom White's malady (and consequent predicament) is the result of his failure to seek help early enough, a characteristic often associated with males as suggested.

Bad Boy Bubby is the probably the closest thing there is to a poster child for Australian urban Gothic. The opening sequence is a grotesque distortion of the family home, which Flo, Bubby's mother, has constructed based on a lie that the outside world is poisoned and uninhabitable. Bubby has presumably lived without interaction with any other human for the entirety of his life, and as a result is not bound by any socially defined family regulations.

After Bubby's emergence from his 'home', subsequent to the killing of his mother and recently returned father, he explores the immediate surrounds (a light industrial area) with total bewilderment. The first character with whom he has a personal interaction is a young woman from the Salvation Army, who, oddly, seems to immediately mimic the actions of his incestuous mother. The young woman bathes and shaves him, before they have sex, during which she comments on Bubby being a "big, weird kid". The scene is composed almost identically to the preceding sex scenes between Bubby and his mother. The significance of the transition he has made

³⁸ Goldsmith.

is minimized here, very effectively. The ease with which Bubby moves from the frightening and perverse captivity of his mother, and out into the 'real' world, without the narrative requiring any modification in his behaviour, suggests that this real world is, in fact, neither less abhorrent nor extraordinary than the world from which he has escaped. The parallel between the sexual encounter with the young woman and the previous incestuous scenes, and the potentially more significant similarities in the way each woman talks about Jesus, establish an important part of the disposition this film takes towards the socially defined regulations to which Bubby is a complete newcomer. Through the entirety of the film, Bubby's relative social inexperience is not positioned centrally as something that gets in the way of his ability to function. In fact, it is precisely his lack of social literacy that motivates much of the social insight in the film. Bubby's 'learning' habit of copying the actions of those he most recently interacts with, and the subsequent reproduction of those actions in the encounters that follow, form an integral part of the challenge this film issues to the way social networks and expectations function.

Bad Boy Bubby is not a subtle film, and the haphazard manner in which Bubby finds himself thrust through each situation - representing major areas of socio-cultural tension in Australia - brings with it many anxieties that are often the focus of films that bring to prominence the primarily human proportions of social and cultural issues. The overarching tension in *Bad Boy Bubby* relates to the anxiety Bubby himself harbours in relation to religion, a discourse from which the film seems to suggest much of the 'normal' social organization is derived. The narrative directly disrupts the grounds on which such codes are based in a scene in which a scientist,

who Bubby discovers playing a Church organ, instructs Bubby on his role in the world:

“You see, no one’s going to help you Bubby, because there isn’t anybody out there to do it. No one. [...] There is no God, there can be no God. It’s ridiculous to think in terms of a superior being. An inferior being maybe, because we [...] arrange our lives with more order and harmony than God ever arranged the Earth. [...] We are the architects of our own existence. [...] Think him out of existence. It is our duty to think God out of existence.”

Bubby’s return to his mother’s ‘home’ marks an emotional and physical return to his entrapment, a state that he clearly longs for. He lies down in the chalk-outline of his mother’s body in an attempt to return to both the confines of her home, and her body, as his increasing sense of alienation from the ‘real’ world starts to make him unhappy. Retracing his original journey, Bubby renegotiates his relationships with the band, with a cat, and finally with the women he meets.

Bubby represents an affront to the social conditions of an idea of suburbia that is primarily implicated, and barely shown explicitly in the way other films discussed here do. The only scene in which the narrative encroaches directly into the suburban space, physically, is when Angel visits her parents with Bubby. They ridicule her for being overweight, and are generally cruel, which causes Bubby to respond as he knows how. At this point, while his behaviour might be thought of as socially inappropriate, he appears quite definitely as the ‘good’ person, and the supposedly Christian parents represent, in one short sequence, the distaste that the writer and director seem to harbour for the social standards that filter down from organized religion. Suburbia is not explicitly represented in the mise-en-scene, and the director instead presents a very dark urban landscape. The way that the narrative interacts with ideas of suburbia is in the relationships that Bubby forms with people, and the ways his behaviour move across the boundaries of what is acceptable.

Bubby's reintegration into the suburban backyard is a narrative convenience that detracts somewhat from the challenging nature of the film, but does suggest, perhaps indirectly, that Bubby's successful convergence with 'society' comes after he has abandoned those ideas to which he initially clung – the conservative networks of socio-cultural institutions and discourses which the film itself manages to align with the incestuous and claustrophobic surroundings of Bubby's initial captivity.

For O'Regan, "[t]he cinema routinely produces representations that are as much interventions into as they are reflections of social formations."³⁹ Films that mobilize intertextual relationships with popular cultural events, or sites, strengthen the link between the screen and reality and consequently heighten the uncanny anxieties that they represent by drawing attention away from the representational status of the film. Rowan Woods' *The Boys* (1998), a screen adaptation of a play, is variously claimed to be at least suggestively linked to the 1986 rape and murder of Anita Cobby, which was a particularly brutal and well-known crime. Helen Yeates explains her own experience of this erosion in the divide between the cinema screen and actual events:

The film, like its theatrical forerunner, is rumoured to be based on the Anita Cobby case [...] At one level, whether it is or not is really beside the point. [...] I couldn't escape thinking of the horrendous Cobby case while I watched the film, and this certainly gave my experience an extra dimension of unease with its layers of imagined horror and anticipation.⁴⁰

The Boys participates in the kind of high realism common to Australian films problematizing the social, and hails popular memory through the links to the Cobby murder - whether legitimate or not - adding something akin to a documentary authority to the narrative. This tactic is a significant hallmark of the social issues film

³⁹ O'Regan, 263.

⁴⁰ Helen Yeates, "A Shameful Spectacle," *Peace Review* 10 (1998): 555.

in Australian Cinema. There is nothing especially out of the ordinary about the Sprague boys, other than the crime they commit. The *unheimlich*, and the abject, ideas that will be covered in more detail in Chapter Four, are terms relating to oppositions in which one pole seems to somehow inhabit the other. Boundaries demarcating taken-for-granted distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, truth and lie, are destabilized by these ideas. In relation to the films covered here, the danger of the other lies in its proximity to the self, as the distance between ordinary and extraordinary is significantly eroded.

The story follows Brett Sprague and his brothers Glenn and Stevie. Brett is released from jail and comes home to an uncomfortable situation and a house full of bitterness and mistrust. Frustrations rise consistently throughout the day until the brothers, having been rejected by all the women in their lives, perpetrate a presumably violent crime (the nature of which is revealed through intermittent flashback sequences) onto a woman they find standing at a bus stop. It is an unnerving film in that it constructs a gritty, desperate realism that the other films I have looked at do not quite achieve. The brothers have a deep distrust for and open hostility towards the system of social organization. They argue about wages, about relationships and about the intentions they have towards each other, and there is an uncomfortable tension between the brothers from the very moment Brett is released from prison. The tension seems to dissipate when they happen upon their victim at the end of the film.

The mise-en-scene of the opening sequence consists of decaying and dirty household items, spectacularly garish décor and broken fittings. This is a ghost of a house that was once probably something like the shining suburban fantasies imagined. These

shots crop up throughout the film, panning or tilting away from unintentionally kitsch household fittings, moving onto to characters that seem, in the main, equally out of place. The gender relationships directly inform most of the tension in the film, and after successively losing their girlfriends, the brothers' aggression, laziness and frustration costs them their relationship with their mother. The final woman they encounter is their victim.

This chapter must necessarily close on something of a contradiction. It seems that the idea of social decay as an undercurrent, in relation to the social issues narrative, might actually be inoperable. Patently, social decay is the primary 'current' in these texts. However, I would argue, in agreement with O'Regan's comments cited in the introduction to this chapter, that social decay (as a narrative focal point) still retains a subordinate status to the largely human dimensions (and human decay) that bespeak the thematic emphasis shared by many films grouped in this area. This opens up the idea of the way an undercurrent functions a little further. It is evident that the undercurrents I am interrogating throughout this project are not necessarily hidden, or obscured. The malevolent and discordant aspects of Australian narratives are not always a subtlety requiring scrutiny to uncover; the social issues narrative is clear evidence of this. However, the level of visibility of the undercurrents I have been searching for in social issues texts does not alter my perspective significantly. Regardless of 'visibility', the undercurrents in these texts are still the key underpinning of much narrative progression, and as such *are* able to be seen as undercurrents inasmuch as they represent that which lies beneath. While the films dealt with here certainly address the thematic significance of violence, racism, misogyny and decay more directly than other those contained in other sections of this

project, their treatment of these ideas as peripheral to the other human elements is telling. The undercurrents of decay are not, in fact, based in the social, but are rather based in the individual. The problems in the narratives discussed stem largely from a character's inability to function within limits prescribed by social systems, for various reasons. Suggesting that a social destabilization is occurring is, it would seem, a misnomer, as the destabilization that each of these narratives has articulated is in relation to an individual who is at the whim of the unchangeable and unsympathetic social order, and it is in this premise that the real undercurrent of the social issues film lies.

Chapter Four - The Boundaries of Horror



Wolf Creek (Greg McLean, 2005)

Good horror stories know what they are doing; they are not randomly tossing out things hoping to be scary. They set out for the edge of a taboo and then say, 'Let's go into this territory and explore what the horror is, let's open it wide and show it to you.'¹

The history of horror fiction is a history of exploration into ideas about opposing forces. Horror stories articulate a tension between poles; a philosophical and physical struggle, the resolution to which lies largely in the collapse of the oppositions they establish. The horror story articulates a position from which these opposing forces are not mutually exclusive, and from which the relationships upon which our expectations are constructed are seen as entirely unstable. Underneath the struggle for rational explanations for fantastic monsters - for certainty in the face of uncertainty - lies the real terror of the horror narrative; that the categories, by which we establish good and evil, real and unreal, stability and instability, are in fact ambiguous, changeable, and obscure. This chapter examines the way theorists of horror have attempted to construct systems of generic classification, and the changing emphasis of investigations, from broad taxonomies to quite specific analyses of socio-cultural concerns, that have ultimately led to the emphasis of horror theory being placed onto oppositional relationships. Tracing the trends of horror film production, through the shift from supernatural to realist horror that occurred in the 1960s, the chapter engages with a range of theorists to illustrate the binary oppositions at work in horror narratives. The links between oppositions that theorists have suggested form a network of ideas that are used to analyse a small selection of Australian horror films.

Where Chapter One used the horror film in order to examine the relationship between cinema and culture, this chapter focuses more directly on the significance of the genre

¹ Greg McLean and John Jarratt, "Australian Gothic: Greg McLean on the Genesis of 'Wolf Creek,'" *Metro* 145 (2005): 17.

itself, by extrapolating the oppositional nature of narrative elements into a socio-cultural context. The chapter questions the textual differentiation between self and other, examines the blurred borders of fiction and reality, and by association, identifies collapses of the spectatorial distance between the viewer and screen. It argues that the contemporary horror narrative concentrates, in the main, on the border between self and other, and on the manifestation of the tension implicit in this relationship.

The Basic Oppositions of Horror

The most obvious polarization represented by the horror narrative might be thought of, reductively, as the tension between that which is safe, and that which is threatening. Calling this relationship into question by mobilising other oppositional relationships, I suggest, is pivotal to the horror narrative, and is the primary concern of this chapter. However, discussion about the horror genre in these kinds of terms implicates a range of problems that demand attention before an examination of specific texts can be performed. As established in Chapter One, arguments for the centrality of certain concerns in a genre run the risk of being reductive and exclusive. Further to this, the tension between the poles of popular entertainment and social comment, of commodity and art, are routinely brought to the fore in theoretical engagements with genre-based texts. Also, the question of generic stability, the very problem of genre itself, must be considered. David Russell explains the difficulty for approaches to horror that rely directly on formulations of generic coherence:

Horror's generic legibility nowadays endures an incessant three-front assault: first, as a result of its formal tendency to unceasingly mutate as an entertainment type defined by shock and novelty; second, as a consequence of the recognition of horror's potential social uses that has inspired an increase in and diversification of critical attention; and, third, a widespread critical indifference

to and suspicion of a working definition of the genre as if a consistent critical vocabulary might be, somehow, a bad thing.²

While the instability of generic classifications Russell highlights is not a problem limited solely to those examining horror films, concerns of categorization have been a consistent, if not major, preoccupation for theorists of horror. Theoretical approaches often appear bound to the project of firstly, justifying the horror film as an object of cultural criticism, and secondly, formulating ideas as to what kinds of texts constitute the genre, before reaching any specific textual analyses. Certainly, my own examinations hereunder do not deviate far from this pattern.

Generally, this kind of discussion must concede that films exist within economic and industrial frameworks, and avoid relying too heavily on theoretical positions that disavow the role genres play in these systems. I would argue that placing emphasis on the horror film as a commodity does not necessarily take credibility away from the idea that the horror genre is constituted by texts that have been, and continue to be, valuable cultural artifacts dealing with social, cultural and political concerns of a most serious order. The boundaries of the genre are indefinite (as with any genre), as indeed are attempts to stabilize categorical and philosophical limits within the horror narrative, and this chapter might be best explained as an attempt to locate this very instability as the source of potentially subversive social and political readings. Barbara Creed suggests that "...the function of the monstrous [is] to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability."³ Taking

² David J. Russell. "Monster Roundup: Reintegrating the Horror Genre," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 233.

³ Barbara Creed, "Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (Routledge: London & New York, 2000), 66.

this notion into account, this chapter will examine the way horror fictions produce and question varying symbolic orders.

The effectiveness of the horror film in calling these symbolic orders into question is often criticized, as the attempt to collapse the distance between common oppositions often results in a purging of the abject narrative material, followed by the restoration of the pre-existing (largely patriarchal) systems. This position has been routinely mobilized by theorists in relation to the oppositions between male and female. In the words of Vivian Sobchack:

The horror film has been seen by many contemporary, psychoanalytically oriented, feminist scholars as a misogynist scenario elaborated within a patriarchal and heterosexual social formation and based on the male fear of female sexuality.⁴

It is pertinent, then, to acknowledge that cinema is a cultural artifact accessing signs and meanings that are inextricably wound into the fabric of social and cultural discourse. Some measure of popular cultural ideas, tensions and desires are played out in cinema, and I contend here that the potential for horror films to engage in challenging and questioning cultural assumptions about, for example, gender, is contained in the ways in which narratives obscure and disrupt categories such as viewer and screen, artifact and culture, real and fictional, and self and other – spaces where play in meaning is a corollary to the play between poles.

Narrative Content and Social Comment

⁴ Vivian Sobchack, "Revenge of *The Leech Woman*: On the Dread of Aging in a Low-Budget Horror Film," in *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, eds. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994), 79.

Encircling the horror genre is a tradition of criticism and commentary that has often produced the suggestion, perhaps with some qualifications, that horror films have largely been a corollary of phases of social anxiety and civil disorder. In the United States, for example, trends in horror film production have been variously linked to the Cold War period and the fear of communism, the social upheavals in the late 1960s and the Vietnam War, and fear of eroding the integrity of the body and mind in the wake of mass and serial killings, and the advancement of medicine and science.⁵ Horror films continue to prompt responses from popular press relating the wider socio-cultural implications of the narrative, in quite direct ways. Evan Williams, discussing the English zombie film *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) has claimed, “[l]ife in England, and perhaps elsewhere, has succumbed to the defining psychological malady of our time: a fanatical thirst for violence and revenge.”⁶ Liam Houlihan comments, in relation to the zombie genre:

Through the decades the humble zombie flick has adapted to reflect the dominant anxiety of the era. From disconnection to war and apocalypse, the long-suffering zombie - electrocuted, radiated and cursed - has become a lightning rod for our neuroses.⁷

Even the recent Australian zombie gore-fest, *Undead* (Michael Spierig and Peter Spierig, 2003), a self-conscious celebration of the genre, doesn’t escape a measure of social comment from the critics:

Amongst the flying gristle the Spierigs have fun at the expense of gun control and economic rationalism and still find time to make ironic stabs at refugee internment, the devastation of the environment and the new cult around celebrity.⁸

⁵ Broad and informative accounts of the relationship between horror films and social contexts can be found in David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (London: Plexus, 1993) and Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

⁶ Evan Williams, “Rapt in infectious thrill of a world gone mad,” review of *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle, *The Australian*, September 3, 2003, 16.

⁷ Liam Houlihan, “Back from the Dead: Two new films show how the zombie genre refuses to stay buried, even as it plays out our anxieties,” *The Australian*, September 3, 2003, 16.

⁸ Peter Galvin, “Directors Speak,” *Inside Film*, September (2003): 22-23.

Perspectives such as this are often overlooked, as the production of a low-budget horror film is often simply dismissed as an exercise in voyeurism with the sole purpose of creating income. Boris Trbic has suggested that making a low-budget film is, invariably, an artistic choice, as if low production values are something to be aspired to.⁹ He does not seem to consider the reality of budget constraints, nor the expectations of consumers, as a claim like this ignores the practicality of funding a feature film while simultaneously ignoring the complex web of relations that exist between 'cult' texts and their readership. *Undead* is precisely the kind of text that the short-sightedness of Trbic is unable to account for, and in terms of his suggestion, the critical potential of the film can be missed.

George Romero's films are posited by Sue-Ellen Case as a direct and highly organized attack on the social 'fabric'. Condensing the zombie genre, she writes:

After the 50s, the lone vampire, or the family of vampires that threatened the human community, is replaced by a proliferation of the undead. Romero's trilogy illustrates the progression: in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a score of the undead threatens a family-unit-type group in a house; in the second film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1977), thousands of undead threaten a smaller, less-affiliated group in a shopping mall, one of the few places remaining; and in *Day of the Dead* (1985), the undead have successfully taken over the continent, finally threatening what dwindles down to the basic heterosexual-couple-unit in a military-industrial complex. Successively, the undead have eliminated the family unit, claimed commodity reification for their own in the shopping mall, and defeated the military industrial complex.¹⁰

Case likens the spread of zombies to the metaphorical spread of the fear of male same-sex relationships and the link to AIDS, and it is clear that the pattern she isolates has resonance across the spectrum of horror production.

⁹ Boris Trbic, "The Low-Budget Australian Horror Film," *Metro* 144 (2005), 44-48.

¹⁰ Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (Routledge: London & New York, 2000), 209.

Horror cinema, anecdotally at least, is experiencing a phase of particular cultural emphasis currently, something akin to fascination, and I would argue that there is much that is of great interest in the recent history of films participating in the horror genre, particularly in an Australian context. The question remains however; what exactly is the horror film, such that a claim of its cultural importance can be made? Attempting to define the horror genre has been a consistent presence in the field of theory concerning horror films. I have already discussed the ways in which categorising horror films statistically, or performing taxonomies by constituting genres and sub-genres, have served to distinguish both phases of production and trends in social significance. This quantitative style of analysis is widely criticized however, by both theorists of horror, and those concerned with the problems of genre itself. David J. Russell argues against ‘laundry list’ systems of classification, claiming they are inherently flawed, no matter how complex and far reaching they appear to be. He points out that while there is an undeniable centrality to notions of the monster and otherness, the systems of identifying horror solely on these premises are inadequate. Russell formulates a scheme of identification based on a tripartite explanatory mechanism for monsters (as the locus of otherness in horror narratives), which is adaptable in a way that ‘laundry list’ approaches cannot be. ‘Real’, ‘unreal’ and ‘part-real’ designate these positions.¹¹ Increasing the specificity of these three categories correspondingly to deviant, supernatural and paranatural, the logic for this taxonomy is based on “the establishment of a pseudo-ontic space and its violation by the monster.”¹² The breach and subsequent repair of the system of realism constructed by a horror narrative is dependent on the kind of monster involved. The way in which the

¹¹ Russell, 241.

¹² Ibid., 246.

deviant, supernatural and paranatural operate to threaten or breach this realism becomes critical to Russell's system of organization.

Despite the claimed increase in complexity over taxonomies of the horror genre that precede it, Russell's approach is very much akin to Tudor's, in his *Monsters and Mad Scientists* (1989), in which insights into wider 'symptoms' of cultural unease are elicited from the organization and quantification of the kinds of threat present in the narrative.¹³ Russell avoids explicitly quantifying films in order to reach his conclusions, but ultimately occupies a perspective that centres on the nature of the threat, or monster (or other) in much the same way as Tudor does. Further to this, Russell's aims appear to be similar to those in Tudor's work. He states:

Such correlations [between socio-cultural context and statistical investigation] may also suggest more general concerns within society itself, supplying a kind of "anxiety index" that links the allegorical function of monsters by type to particular social or historical events.¹⁴

Explicitly quantifying or not, Russell is searching for concrete links between the horror narrative and social circumstance, and as a consequence his own system of organization conforms closely to the standards of the taxonomies preceding it.

Self/Other, the Abject and the Familiar

Turning away from quantitative taxonomy, Tudor's more recent work on horror films concentrates on the significance to the narrative of what he calls the 'beast within' explanation. Bringing the attention directly onto the instability of self/other distinctions, Tudor claims that the "attraction of horror derives from its appeal to the

¹³ Russell draws attention, specifically, to Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *American Nightmares: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 16-17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

‘beast’ concealed within the superficially civilised human”.¹⁵ This emphasis on collapsing, or questioning the uncertain borderlines between self and other has been an important locus of attention for theorists of the horror genre. Even the claimed adaptability of Russell’s explanatory model originates in, at the most basic level, the nature of otherness in the narrative. Robin Wood argues that the self/other distinction is informed by the notion of repression, and that “what escapes repression has to be dealt with by oppression”.¹⁶ For Rita Felski, horror is a vessel into which the subjects of repression flow. Agreeing with Wood, Felski argues that horror is: “the articulation of repressed desires relating in particular to sexuality and aggression: typical themes of the horror text include incest, necrophilia, bestiality, homosexuality, rape, murder and fantasies of mass destruction.”¹⁷ The ‘other’ is the entity onto which we project the aspects of the self that have been repressed, in order to discredit them. Russell argues:

...Otherness itself expressed through the horror film and its monsters may also serve to point to the breakdown and failure of repression as symptomatically expressed through a realization of unconscious desire for which the monster acts as a medium.¹⁸

The monstrous ‘other’, then, represents the common ground between theorists, and is crucial to any horror film. I would argue that as the physical and philosophical distance between self and other has been (and continues to be) eroded by the horror film (and by association, as the failure to repress this dark and unconscious otherness is more apparent), interest has been aroused in other problematic divisions between oppositional categories and their potential as powerful explanatory mechanisms. This

¹⁵ Andrew Tudor, “Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre” in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. M. Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 48.

¹⁶ Robin Wood, “The American Nightmare: Horror in the '70s,” in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. M. Jancovich. (London: Routledge, 2002), 26.

¹⁷ Rita Felski, “Kitsch, Romance Fiction and Male Paranoia: Stephen King meets the Frankfurt School” *Continuum* 4, 1 (1990), 48.

¹⁸ Russell, 237.

is certainly the case from the perspective of Freud, whose widely deployed treatise on the uncanny suggests that a narrative situation can become unpredictable and potentially dangerous through dissolving the lines between familiar and unfamiliar. The uncanny echoes the idea of the beast within, and is encapsulated in this passage from Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs:

An 'uncanny' experience may occur when one's home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and 'out of place' simultaneously. This simultaneity is important to stress since, in Freud's terms, it is not simply the unfamiliar in itself which generates the anxiety of the uncanny; it is specifically the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar—the way the one seems always to inhabit the other.¹⁹

The horror film is involved in a process of defamiliarization, blurring lines between the self and the other. Wood points out the doppelgänger motif present in many horror narratives as an exemplar of this process, in which the monster is revealed as “normality's shadow”.²⁰ For Gelder and Jacobs, who in the above instance are referring specifically to traditional Gothic narratives, the uncanny, the simultaneous feeling of being in place and out of place, is useful in understanding how the threat in contemporary horror often arises from familiarity. Narrative devices such as monsters, castles, ghouls and supernatural nightmares have, over time, mutated into suburban basements inhabited by unremarkable people. The dreadful and monstrous threat, in the sub-genres known as the 'family' and 'body' horror, no longer simply slinks along in the shadows. It *is* the shadow.

¹⁹ Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 22.

²⁰ Wood, “The American nightmare,” 26.

Catherine Belsey observes that “[t]he uncanny obscures the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world of fiction is based.”²¹ Casting doubt on the actual ‘otherness’ of the other, and therefore rendering oppositional relationships decidedly less stable, is pivotal to the application of the uncanny to the horror film. The shift in focus, to the destabilization of the very dichotomies on which many assumptions regarding horror narratives were previously based, occurred, broadly speaking, in the 1960s. *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero 1968) is an important example of the late 1960s shift towards a representation of the social landscape that was simultaneously satirical and highly realistic. The fear of the very ordinary implied by this paradoxically satirical social mimesis is characteristic of the films that mark this change in thematic material. Jake Horsley asserts that “where Romero and his film took things into immensely new territory was in his suggestion that normality, not abnormality, might be the most insane, deadly, and aberrant idea of them all”.²² *Night of the Living Dead* remains in many ways a shocking film, in a genre that is renowned for the speed with which the confronting and challenging can become monotonous. There is a sense of grim seriousness about the film that is not often matched in horror cinema, and an ending that is anything but classic Hollywood. Horsley goes on to say:

The way in which Romero subverts all the conventions and constantly departs from formula was certainly remarkable at the time, and it was this fact, as much as the depiction of violence and gore, that made the film such a breakthrough. Nothing turns out in the film the way we would expect it to and Romero sent the horror movie, with one solid blow, out of its comic book formula into a new realm, one of realism and nihilism.²³

This is the pivotal idea in the transition that occurred in the 1960s. Romero had encroached, uncomfortably, on the comfort zone between ‘reality’ and the screen with

²¹ Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.

²² Jake Horsley, *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery 1958-1999. Volume 1: American Chaos, From Touch of Evil to The Terminator* (Lanham, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1999), 221.

²³ *Ibid.*, 224.

Night of the Living Dead, forcing a bleak, hopeless and frighteningly believable world onto the screen. The film demonstrates a significant dismantling of typical genre expectations, and the weight of implications this text holds are explored frequently in contemporary horror theory. Barry Keith Grant writes: “it helped establish what many critics have identified as a trend toward a progressive sensibility in the contemporary horror film.”²⁴ The graphic gore and rotting zombies, which the film initially scandalized, are in fact less important than the treatment of the characters. The physically and metaphorically gruesome climax comes as a result of significant and stereotypical human failings in strained social circumstances. Grant contends that this focus on the characters is a tool of locating “the monstrous *within* the normal.”²⁵ Further, the uncertainty of the existence of any tangible or incorruptible benevolence in the social order weighs heavily on the desperate situation, and remains constant throughout. It is important to note, however, that while this shift in narrative focus happened to horror cinema in the 1960s, the subject of the erosion of the self/other distinction is not solely the province of post-1960s cinema. José B. Monleon examines the internal disorder implicated by horror narratives in the nineteenth century, uncovering ideas about polar distinctions that resonate strongly with the 1960s shift:

This internalization of monstrosity by the dominant culture would still maintain, during the major part of the nineteenth century, a certain ambivalence, as if the social imagination hesitated and was incapable of deciding what image to assign to unreason: either to completely mask otherness or to blur the lines of separation between the self and the other [...] This definite internalization of otherness, this final inclusion of unreason within the parameters of reason, implied not only that monstrosity was ‘real,’ but that it actually formed part of reason. The monsters were possible because ‘we’ were the monsters.²⁶

²⁴ Barry Keith Grant, “Science Fiction Double Feature: Ideology in the Cult Film,” in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, ed. J. P. Telotte (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 126.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁶ José B. Monleon, “1848: The Assault on Unreason,” in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (Routledge: London & New York, 2000), 22-23.

Monleon's observations confirm the perspective that the threat in horror fiction has routinely been borne out of familiarity. Acknowledging this idea brings the link between our socio-cultural circumstances and cultural artifacts into a clearer perspective. The relationship, and the flow of meaning between culture and artifact, becomes clearest during the narrative moments in which polarizations on which social assumptions are based are destabilized.

The idea of crossing of boundaries, or rather, the uncanny relationship between dichotomous poles in the horror narrative, is enriched by Kristeva's explanation of the abject, of which the zombie is a tantalisingly relevant example. "It is death infecting life [...] Imaginary uncanniness and real threat."²⁷ Kristeva suggests that the abject exists inbetween categories, defying order and disrespecting borders. The abject occupies the space beneath the social norms of purity and morality, simultaneously rejected from, yet nonetheless inhabiting these ideas. Kristeva says that in the abject "there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality."²⁸ In relation to the collapse of these kinds of opposition, Louise Krasniewicz argues that horror plays with the notion of social circulation. She claims that there exists a system of circulation – commensurate with Creed's (Lacanian) symbolic order - that must be maintained, and any threat to this order, such as the removal of any body that should be 'in circulation', exposes the fragility of the system itself, and therefore must be rectified. This removal creates a new system, with the 'removed' body as reference and focus, which has the effect of dislocating the presumed 'centre', and questioning the central distinction between self and other; "[w]hen a body is inhabited by an evil other, it is creating its own isolated

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

social world, creating its own rules and keeping social relations in a discrete but perverse unit.”²⁹ As the narrative disrupts the system of circulation - the symbolic order - the relationship between the normal and the monstrous, the self and other becomes critically important. Again, reaching back to criticisms levelled at early horror fiction, we see that this is not a new idea. Monleon explains that in the horror fictions of the late nineteenth century, the progressive breakdown of the “old polarization of good and evil” comes as the result of the “internalization of the demonic.”³⁰ Monleon notes considerable “divisions of the subject” as the new relationship between good and evil results in a kind of fracturing of a unified subject position, in part due to the division between classes that arose commensurate with the industrial changes of the time. Horror fiction, it would seem, has consistently displayed something of a preoccupation with the collapse of ‘traditional’ oppositions.

Narratives that place the monstrous other at the centre of the pseudo-ontic system, to use Russell’s phrase, are pivotal in the emergence of the ‘familiar’ monster. This uncanny foe, typical of horror films produced during and after the 1960s, is generally something quite ordinary, and in fact, in many cases, downright mundane. Cynthia Freeland has called this trend of production ‘realist horror’.³¹ In a scathing account of traditional critical approaches to horror cinema, Freeland asserts the importance, in contemporary horror films, of the normality of the monster. She goes on to argue that much theory fails to adequately address realist horror, in which the monster is often not fantastic, or extraordinary at all. Freeland does not deny the monstrousness of the

²⁹ Louise Krasniewicz, “Cinematic Gifts: The Moral and Social Exchange of Bodies in Horror Films” in *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, eds Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992): 43.

³⁰ Monleon, 24.

³¹ Cynthia Freeland, “Realist Horror” in *Philosophy and Film*, eds. C. A. Freeland and T. E. Wartenburg (New York: Routledge, 1995), 127.

main character, but rather argues that realist horror emphasizes the normality; “such films rely crucially upon the realism of their horror, the possibility of their monsters”.³² She uses the examples of *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme 1991), and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (McNaughton 1986) to highlight her points, as both these films are based, although perhaps rather loosely, on real criminal cases. The plots of both these examples serve specifically to highlight the everyday nature of the serial killer or rapist, and our interest is derived from the narrative emphasis on the very thin line that forms the boundary between screen and reality. In fact, for Freeland, it is the primary purpose of the realist horror narrative to propose “serious confusions between representations of fiction and reality”,³³ insidiously planting the actual possibility of the on-screen events into popular consciousness. On one hand the killer is no direct threat to the audience, but on the other hand the killer is not entirely fictional - a situation engendering unease. This notion is central to the plot of *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005), a film that plays knowingly with the fear of possibility, mobilising a high level of intertextuality with fictional and cultural texts and sites. The pattern of confusion, of obscuring boundaries and generating instability remains a crucial component in contemporary horror narratives. Further, the destabilising project is assisted and emphasized in narratives focussing on the ordinariness of the monster, and the unremarkable nature of the threat. While zombies are not exactly wandering around the streets outside cinemas, Horsley reminds us that it is critical that they could be, stating that “Romero shows a real gift – almost a genius – for making the fantastic seem mundanely plausible”.³⁴ I would say at this point, then, that horror films are, explicitly, texts of transgression: exercises in depolarization, in which the fantastic becomes mundane, and the monstrous other inhabits the self.

³² Freeland, 133.

³³ Ibid., 140.

³⁴ Horsley, 223.

The Embattled Self and the Postmodern

Horror cinema demonstrates an intersection of formalist and realist perspectives, or perhaps, moves rapidly along the continuum between these perspectives. The ‘horror’ is often the result of the point at which the greatest naturalism meets the moment in which the film displays its self-conscious creativity and artistic expressiveness.³⁵

Horror films seek to disrupt the ordinary (to challenge the film’s own symbolic orders, or pseudo-ontic systems). They are involved in not simply questioning the basis on which we commonly differentiate such categories as male/female, self/other, and even truth/fiction, but in fact they propose that such distinctions have always been, at best, subject to indeterminacy. How can a symbolic order sustain a division like self/other, when a monstrous other can disrupt that division, and the division between fiction and reality be so easily obscured? The destabilization of boundaries in this manner is of course a popular signature of many postmodern theories of culture.

Of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, (arguably the stable-mate to *Night of the Living Dead*),

Linda Williams claims:

Psycho’s array of dislocations – between normal and psychotic; between masculine and feminine; between Eros and fear; even between the familiar Hitchcockian suspense and a new, frankly gender-based horror – are what makes it an important precursor of the thrill-producing attractions [...] which I would like to identify as postmodern.³⁶

For Williams, *Psycho* is “the moment when the experience of going to the movies began to be constituted as providing a certain generally transgressive sexualized thrill

³⁵ Richard Howells, in *Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 171-196, offers a pragmatic and succinct evaluation of realism in film.

³⁶ Linda Williams, “Discipline and Fun: *Psycho* and Postmodern Cinema,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 360.

of promiscuous abandonment to indeterminate ‘other’ identities.”³⁷ Freeland’s perspective can be used to support this. Throughout her discussion, she is very clear in her suggestion that realist horror is a subgenre that relies specifically, and without ambiguity, on its very possibility, rather than impossibility. The idea that realist horror attempts to narrow the gap between representative art and real life is central to both Freeland’s argument, and Williams’ assertions about the “transgressive thrill” of confusing coherent identities. This is an idea that can be informed by the scepticism concerning the dividing line between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ that has been aroused through the discourse of postmodernism. The vocabulary of postmodern theory has much in common with the vocabulary of horror film criticism. Allan Lloyd Smith suggests that in critical uptake of both postmodernism and the Gothic horror film style, the two have at times shared the dubious honour among theorists of being likened to each other through their impracticalities and problems as categories, rather than their usefulness. Portions of these discursive networks appear to operate in and around each other, displaying a not insignificant region of theoretical common ground, including ideas about indeterminacy, paranoia, pastiche, nostalgia, comedy, and importantly, self-awareness. *Night of the Living Dead* is praised for deliberately eschewing genre conventions, and Wes Craven’s *Scream* is widely regarded as an exercise in self-knowing subversion, challenging boundaries between text, audience and director through its intertextual play, making reference to the genre of slasher which Craven himself helped establish with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series.

Smith claims both postmodernism and the Gothic are “responses to the confusing new order – or [...] the new disorder.”³⁸ Tudor notes that: “the dominant discourse of

³⁷ Williams, 361-362.

³⁸ Alan Lloyd Smith, “Postmodernism/Gothicism” in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, eds. V. Sage and A. L. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 18.

horror film prior to the 1960s pre-supposed an ultimately secure world”,³⁹ which suggests insecurity is inherent in the worldview of horror films made after this time. It seems we are justified in claiming that there is a tangible link between post-1960s horror, and descriptions of social experience that have been aligned with a postmodern perspective. Tudor has tried to establish this link by claiming that the modern film horror moves to express the ‘embattled’ self, typical of the social and cultural fragmentation associated with ‘postmodern experience’. The ‘paranoid’ horror film constitutes a discourse predominant in contemporary horror films, and through its lens the world is seen as almost completely unreliable, inherently producing fear, instability, risk and anxiety.⁴⁰ The postmodern film (if such a phrase can be used) performs an “uncoupling”⁴¹ – of director from style, of referent from reality, and of a film’s internal signs from any specific historical formation or understanding of those signs – that is clearly evident in horror films.

Tudor, Smith and Freeland have provided accounts of contemporary horror that are closely linked, particularly in their emphasis on uncertainty and anxiety in modern productions, and the way this anxiety is attached to the confusion and decay of ‘normal’ categorical distinctions. One of the more fertile distinctions for theoretical engagement has been that of gender. Peter Hutchings has claimed that the films of Dario Argento, arguably one of the most influential progenitors of the contemporary slasher film, “focus on ambiguities in sexual and gendered identity.”⁴² In the kinds of analysis performed by the theorists mentioned already, significant emphasis is

³⁹ Andrew Tudor, “From Paranoia to Postmodernism? The Horror Movie in Late Modern Society,” in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. S. Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 108.

⁴⁰ Tudor, “Why horror?” 52.

⁴¹ Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 211.

⁴² Peter Hutchings, “The Argento effect,” in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, eds. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 133.

frequently placed on gender distinctions in horror films, particularly in relation to the slasher sub-genre and the female victim. Carol Clover has written extensively on this subject, and of particular interest here is her standpoint on the ‘final girl’ seen in slasher films, and the potential contradiction this creates for feminist perspectives.⁴³ In representing and questioning sexual identities, the socio-cultural implications of the transgressions present within horror films appear most fertile as a source of cultural criticism. However, Krasniewicz argues that wider issues of difference are at stake in horror narratives. She claims that:

...general questions about the differences not just between males and females but between humans and antihumans always haunt the horror film and not always in stereotypically gendered ways.⁴⁴

She goes on to observe:

...the real horror results not from the fear that we could revert to being animals; this is something we already know. Instead, the horrible thing to acknowledge is that we are, indeed, stuck with being human with socially defined bodies torn between the conflicting desires, prohibitions, and temptations of our community.⁴⁵

This is a powerful suggestion. Perhaps we are not concerned about crossing boundaries, but rather, the fear of the horror film is that we might not be able to do so. We might, it would seem, be very much trapped by the categories that are transgressed through horror narratives. There is a voyeuristic aspect to watching horror monsters, then, in that they represent the pleasure of border-crossing that we fear we may not be capable of. Williams calls this the “transgressive sexualised thrill”, and it is important to note that Krasniewicz highlights our bodies as “socially defined”.

⁴³ See Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ Krasniewicz, 36.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 42-43.

This demonstrates strong links to the criticism of feminist theories of horror mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in which the return to narrative equilibrium involves a restoration of the dominant order. I would argue, however, that readings of horror films informed by resistive theoretical standpoints still inform discourses of cultural resistance in valuable ways. Tania Modleski argues that horror cinema “is as apocalyptic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure, and the specious good as many types of high art.”⁴⁶ Horror is a genre that attacks, visually, thematically, literally and metaphorically, the culture from which it arises. It is a genre of paradox and parody, consistently hinting at the irony of a culture that is fascinated and excited by terror. Indeed, Modleski goes on to say (of horror audiences): “...the masses are revelling in the demise of the very culture they appear most enthusiastically to support.”⁴⁷ This idea traces strongly the notion identified by Barry K. Grant (in Chapter One), that the audience may partake in the satisfaction of simultaneously questioning the dominant culture, while remaining secure within its socially prescribed limits. The horror film, then, is an outlet for this idea - a critique from within – and is an ambiguous expression of both rebellion and conformity; a site of hermeneutic depth.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Tania Modleski, “The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 162.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁸ According to Leah Ceccarelli, in “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998), resistive reading sits alongside strategic ambiguity and hermeneutic depth as kinds of polysemic analysis. While resistive readings are seen as favouring the audience, strategic ambiguity emphasizes the author in the process of meaning generation. Hermeneutic depth, as an approach, registers multiple potential meanings within a text. Cited in Meyer, Michaela D.E. “Utilizing Mythic Criticism in Contemporary Narrative Culture: Examining the “Present-Absence” of Shadow Archetypes in *Spider-Man*,” *Communication Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2003), 519.

Australian Horrors

Australian horror films are a remarkably varied group, particularly given the tendency, as mentioned in Chapter Three, towards predominantly social and human proportions in national cinema narratives. Jonathan Rayner suggests that much Australian horror stands atop the category of the Gothic, in which the “nihilistic horror of immorality, isolation, and idiosyncrasy recurs.”⁴⁹ He argues that “in the earliest instances [of the Gothic] it is the human habitations in the landscape that represent the true locus of horror.”⁵⁰ This idea remains a key feature of Australian Horror, and is self-evident in even the most recent incarnations, like *Wolf Creek*. So far, this chapter has established that identifying the challenges to socially defined dichotomies within the narrative can be crucial to informing socio-cultural readings of horror, and this idea can be applied to a range of Australian films. Peter Weir’s short *Homesdale* (1971) calls the relationship between the self and the monstrous other into question, as the hapless Mr Malfry seems to journey from safe to threatening, to call on the simple opposition mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. *Homesdale* has been described as “a dark parody of psychotherapy,”⁵¹ and uncertainty about the mental health of practically all the characters is prominent in the narrative. Similar questions are raised in relation to *Thirst* (Rod Hardy, 1979), in which a young woman who is believed to be a distant descendant of Elizabeth Bathory is forcefully indoctrinated into a blood-drinking cult.

Narrative hallmarks of both these films are a decidedly alterable set of social standards, obscuring the distinction between what is taboo, and what is socially

⁴⁹ Jonathan Rayner, ““Terror Australis”: Areas of Horror in the Australian Cinema,” in *Horror International*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 100.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵¹ Marek Haltof, *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 13.

acceptable. Mr Malfry's experience at the Homesdale retreat is disordered, confused and not a little convoluted, but it is comparable to the journey of Kate Davis and her attempts to resist the advances of the 'vampire' cult. Absolute certainty as to her own perspective on the predicament is not afforded to the viewer, and as such, questions concerning the line between sanity and insanity are fore-grounded, as each character, in effect, succumbs to the dominant force at work. Robert de Young has argued that "the historical/mythological myths of vampirism have been used by writers and film-makers as vehicles for investigations into subversive personal, sexual, and socio-political practices,"⁵² and *Thirst* demonstrates a clear indifference towards these 'socio-political practices'. Kate is gradually removed from her ordinary life as information about the secret order is revealed to her. The cult members are actually part of a global elite, literally feeding off the lives of a slave class.

That portion of Kristeva's notion of the abject which relates to pollution, and in particular, expelled bodily matter, can be used to link *Thirst* to the Richard Franklin horror film, *Patrick* (1978), which concerns a man in an apparently vegetative coma who appears to be able to influence the physical world around him in supernatural ways. Patrick himself is the living dead, he is, in effect, a zombie, occupying the paradoxical position of being both dead and alive, and neither dead nor alive. Patrick is in a corpse-like vegetative condition, and his only direct method of communication is spitting, which is arguably the purging of polluting waste, the expulsion of the abject used to bridge the gap that exists between himself and his carers. In a similar transmission of waste, or perhaps, exchange of physical matter, the blood drinking

⁵² Robert de Young, "Maintaining Good Blood Lines: The Vampire Family of the 1990s" in *Our Selection On: Writings on Cinema's Histories: Selected papers from the 7th History and Film Conference*, eds. Jeff Doyle, Bill van der Heide and Susan Cowen (Campbell: National Film and Sound Archive/Australian Defence Force Academy, 2000), 233.

cult in *Thirst* base their power on the systematic removal of blood, in grotesque ‘dairies’. It is insinuated several times that Patrick is also receiving sexual favours from his carer, and as such the only tangible physical effects of Patrick’s presence are spit and semen. Both films represent a physical exchange of bodily waste that is underscored by a far less tangible force of mental pressure. In respect to transgression of categorical boundaries, I would suggest that Patrick might be seen as a disruption to the relationship between the conscious and unconscious, and the limits of the categories of alive and dead.

A much more highly stylized and more directly genre based film that is not so easily able to be addressed from the perspective of analysing breakdowns in socially defined relationships is *Cubby House* (Murray Fahey, 2001). The narrative here plays on the good/evil distinction in a very traditional sense of aligning this dichotomy with God and the Devil. *Cubby House* also brings an American, urban family into suburban Brisbane. The narrative engages with, and actually strengthens the polarity between the suburbs of Australia and the presumed ‘civilized’ world of America, but in doing so locates the family somewhere in-between. After the family relocate to the Aussie suburbs, the children fall under the influence of a demonic spirit in their backyard. I would argue that the film offers a critique, on some level, of the suburban experience, an experience that by its very definition is a middle ground, or an in-between space.⁵³ Constructing an intersection between the civilized urban, and presumably uncivilized rural, *Cubby House* uses the private space of a backyard in which to enact the monstrous threat. The physical location of the threat, an ordinary backyard, plays upon the very simplest notion of what is safe and threatening that I have mentioned

⁵³ Chris Healy, Introduction to *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, eds. Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), xvii.

variously in this chapter, and further, hails a popular cultural icon that is ordinarily the realm of children as the location of the threat.

In a fashion not entirely dissimilar, *Body Melt* (Philip Brophy, 1993) deploys a distinctly 1990s set of representations of Australiana in the suburbs, a recognition of the cultural hangover of the entrepreneurial 1980s. A modern and squeaky-clean suburb, apparently populated largely by young professionals, is the subject of experiments conducted by a pharmaceutical company using a health farm as a front for their operations. The film participates in the conventions of the splatter genre (the special effects were, in fact, devised by the same team that worked on Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992)), and throughout the almost celebratory disruption of visceral material – what Rayner calls a “catalogue of psychological, sexual, and criminal disruption and bodily abjection”⁵⁴ – it enacts a parody of particular set of social conditions, highlighting an instability in the network of discourses surrounding the rampant capitalism of the 1980s, medicine and suburbia.

Although arguably not an Australian film, *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) was conceived by two Australians, and poses questions about the nature of extreme, patently sadistic violence in the face of an unclear distinction between good and evil. Characters oscillate between empathy and aggression, and the ability to make moral judgments concerning their actions is clouded by a serial killer who professes to ‘help’ his victims. Indeed, the only known survivor of the killer, ‘Jigsaw’, who is barely able to speak as a result of the horrors she has experienced, expresses gratitude to him. In examining the relationships between torture, murder, and socialized standards of such

⁵⁴ Rayner, 103.

ideas as ‘good’ and ‘evil’, *Saw* manages to imply the blame for the horrific violence, in part at least, is displaced from the serial killer onto a social order that ‘allows’ such a thing to happen (a society populated, it seems, by liars, cheats, spies, drug addicts and prostitutes), and a survival mentality that seemingly authorizes any measures necessary.

Visitors, Wolf Creek, and Lost Things

Visitors (Richard Franklin, 2003), like several other prominent Australian films, including *Dead Calm* (Phillip Noyce, 1989), and *Dogwatch* (Laurie McInnes, 1999), makes use of an ocean setting. It is the story of a solo circumnavigation attempt by a young woman named Georgia Perry, and her struggles with isolation, as a result of becoming stranded in peculiarly calm waters. These are internal struggles that seem to manifest in what appear to be a series of increasingly disturbing hallucinations. So much information is out of reach in this film that it can’t help but confuse the boundary between what is real and what is not. Rather than being a side effect of the location of the monstrous threat, the disruptive depolarising force in this narrative erupts as the primary compositional motivation. The quest for any facet of ‘real’ information drives the journey of both Georgia and viewer. The uncertainty over the authenticity of almost all information presented is called into question. While Georgia is uncertain of the nature of the things she is witnessing, we are similarly left uncertain of the bigger picture. There is a very subtle line here that, quite often, narratives of this style would allow us to cross, giving access to a slightly greater range of narrative information to appease at least some of the curiosity that the questions have aroused. In this instance though, it seems as though Richard Franklin does not want us to cross this line at all. The narrative arc of *Visitors* is such that

information is withheld almost indefinitely, fissures in reason are not completely closed, and ultimately, while narrative equilibrium is restored, it seems that it was never a state from which we have travelled, such that we could return to it comfortably.

Despite the uncertainties, *Visitors* suggests the relationship between viewer and screen is crucial, and demonstrates something of Freeland's suggestions about realist horror. Repeated emphasis, in the dialogue between Georgia and other characters via her two-way radio, about the dangers of isolation, and lingering questions regarding Georgia's pre-journey mental stability result in the fantastic and surreal hallucinations being both expected and potentially even normal. *Visitors* presents an unknown and malevolent foe that Georgia is battling, a distinct and monstrous other, yet the chance that this other is in fact, all in Georgia's head, as it were, muddies the issue of otherness somewhat. The monster cannot be defeated (its pollution cannot be expelled, to place the situation in terms of the abject) until its precise nature is revealed, yet that revelation is dependent on narrative conditions that seemingly cannot be met – the rigid restriction in narrative information ensures that no real measure of the mental stability of Georgia is made available. Even at her most 'sane', she is still engaging in telepathic conversations with her cat. Tudor's "beast within" explanation of narrative focus resonates strongly here, as the excess within Georgia's mental and emotional state spills out into the hallucinatory, nightmarish visions.

Another helpful tool in explaining portions of *Visitors*, and indeed the other films mentioned in this chapter, is Žižek's use of the visual metaphor of the Möbius band. This is an object with unique mathematical properties - it has only one surface, yet at

a glance appears to have two – and Žižek invokes this curious object to explain the relationship between “surface and depth, reality and fantasy” in horror fiction, suggesting that “if we progress far enough on one surface, all of a sudden we find ourselves on its reverse.”⁵⁵ Georgia is unable to extricate herself from the mental anguish of her overbearing, and ultimately suicidal mother, and the guilt over the crippling injuries caused to her father. As she ‘progresses’, what is real and what is hallucination become indistinguishable. Her physical and emotional isolation are compounded by shifts in the depth of narrative information from flashback, to dream sequences, to hearing her thoughts.

Playing heavily on a subplot of familial disorder, *Visitors* foregrounds the relationship between Georgia and her parents as a psychological barrier that is reproduced in her physical entrapment on the boat, and in the ocean. The problems raised in *Visitors* however, remain either unresolved, or resolved in what might best be described as an indefinite manner. The hallucinations, if indeed that is what they are, are accompanied by numerous temporal dislocations in the form of flashbacks, but it remains unclear whether or not Georgia’s mother, father, and the pirates are hallucinations, or if they exist. *Visitors* operates primarily in, and around, the destabilization what is real and unreal. It deals, thematically, with concerns of mental health, and the loss of control or free will in the face of mental decay. The relationships and dichotomies that the narrative identifies, and destabilizes, suggest that the story serves as something of a literal and metaphorical exploration of isolation, a not uncommon element in Australian cinema.

⁵⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large”, in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London & New York: Verso, 1992), 227.

Of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), Wood claims that "...it brings to focus a spirit of negativity, an undifferentiated lust for destruction that seems to lie not far below the surface of the modern collective consciousness."⁵⁶ It comes as no surprise that *Wolf Creek* has been compared to Hooper's film on almost equal terms. This is a film that transforms the Australian outback, and its cartoonish male stereotypes into a nightmare in a manner that suggests a sense of this lust for destruction that Wood speaks of. *Wolf Creek* knowingly and playfully obscures the distinction between real and fictional. From the outset, it demonstrates a high level of intertextuality, both with both other fictional texts and with popular culture. Characters openly parody short sequences from *Crocodile Dundee*, for example (the infamous "that's not a knife" scene), while the film unsettlingly performs the very same parody on a more sinister level. There has also been considerable commentary concerning the relationship between *Wolf Creek* and the criminal cases of Ivan Milat and the disappearance of Peter Falconio, cases that are very much imprinted in the recent Australian popular memory. While there is doubt as to whether or not *Wolf Creek* is based in any way on actual criminal cases, it is the link to popular memory that is important for the effectiveness of the documentary authority that the film attempts to draw from. This passage from Catherine Belsey helps to shed more light on this notion.

Should we see these films as cinema at play, a sophisticated form of self-referentiality, postmodern metafiction? Probably. But that does not eliminate the possibility that it is also a cultural symptom, indicating an increasing uncertainty about the borderline between fiction and fact, between the lives we imagine and the simulacra we live, and a corresponding anxiety about the implications of that uncertainty.⁵⁷

The uncertainty over whether or not *Wolf Creek* is based in fact, and the apparent ease with which it probably could be, generate the anxiety Belsey mentions. The

⁵⁶ Robin Wood, *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 26. Cited in Modleski, 162.

⁵⁷ Belsey, 8.

relationship between the film and the criminal cases with which it has been linked is an almost perfect copy of the relationship between *The Boys* and the Anita Cobby murder mentioned in Chapter Three. The actual links between the film and the criminal case are only loosely suggestive, but it is this very suggestiveness, the way the film intimates the comparisons as unavoidable, that is particularly instructive. The narrative takes the most direct route possible towards destabilising the boundaries of the fictional and the real.

This emphasis on the possibility of the narrative is maintained throughout *Wolf Creek*. Heavy use of hand-held shots and a very long pre-credit opening create a distinct fly-on-the-wall perspective. The opening scenes, and in particular the slightly embarrassing drunken behaviour of the characters, are almost totally devoid of non-diegetic soundtrack elements. This sequence generates the effect of asking the viewer to occupy that uniquely and distinctly uncomfortable position of being the only sober person in a room full of drunks. Creating a sense of the 'real', of the idea that this is all too possible, is integral to the way *Wolf Creek* hails popular culture, and it is maintained fairly consistently throughout the film. There are several wide landscape shots in the introductory sequence of the trio's journey that are reminiscent of *Walkabout*, a film similarly underscored by a sense of menace in the landscape (during its early stages at least). In contrast though, the landscape in *Walkabout* seems to affect the lost children directly, imposing a malevolent force on them through its impressive immensity, whereas the landscapes of *Wolf Creek* are not imbued with a 'character' in the same manner, and are simply presented as cold, empty settings.

Director Greg McLean claims that:

[c]ulturally, our relationship to the landscape, since the time we were dumped here, has always been one of battle and fear. We're constantly struggling to cut it down or change it, but we can't because it remains bigger than we are.⁵⁸

This fear is first evident as the characters leave the beachside sanctuary. There is a distinct lament for the apparent freedom of the ocean, as if the very act of turning away from the coast and travelling inland is in some way wrong. English backpacker Liz swims naked before her companions wake up, in a scene that suggests that this 'end of the road' is both literal and metaphorical. Venturing into the interior, both physically and psychologically, is a dangerous undertaking, and one that will involve the surrender of freedom that the ocean seems to offer. This idea is mirrored after the three have been captured, drugged and 'contained'. Liz manages to escape briefly, and views a video from the stash of personal effects the kidnapper has gathered from his previous victims. The voiceover of the family's father is heard saying "country people *are* friendly", and is an unnerving moment in which the popular idea of the honesty and trustworthiness of the stereotypical Aussie bushman is counterpointed by the reality of a reclusive serial killer. Heading away from the ocean is not only dangerous because of the inhospitable environment, but because in this environment, our assumptions are overturned. Small visual cues add to the danger of the environment. Night time landscape shots, in which the only illumination is from a distance, dim horizon line, suggest the entrapment that the characters are entering.

The film emphasizes the ugliness of Australian stereotypes – the typical bush bloke is unequivocally a menace, not to be trusted, and potentially dangerous. This is evident before the trio have encountered the serial killer. The incidental characters at the small truck-stop are crude and threatening, and ironically they provide the negative

⁵⁸ McLean and Jarratt, 19.

stereotype against which Mick Taylor first appears to be a relief. Creed observes that the ultimate form of the abject, the corpse, as represented by various types of undead characters, provides “some of the most compelling images of horror in the modern cinema.”⁵⁹ Animate corpses represent the body without a soul, one of the “most basic forms of pollution.”⁶⁰ The animate corpse, the living dead, is a signifier that disrupts and potentially breaks down the border between life and death in such proximity to the subject, I would argue, as to be utterly terrifying. It is this very border, between the living and dead body - in religious terms, between those with and without a soul - that horror cinema plays with so effectively, and which represents the most powerful of uncanny fears; that of the decaying body. I would argue that this idea is relevant also to the fiction in which the monstrous other is a serial killer, for example. The killer occupies, through actions, the position of the body without a soul. The act of murder itself renders the culprit, metaphorically, soul-less. Therefore, the serial killer occupies the same position as the zombie, representative of the fear of death itself, and appearing as a sign of the failure to successfully repress that fear. Tellingly, the final scene of *Wolf Creek* shows the killer literally vanishing into the landscape, presumably indicating both his elusive nature in the face of the law, and his status as a physical part of the landscape. Mick Taylor is, paradoxically, real, yet inseparable from and unable to be located within the landscape.

Where *Wolf Creek* destabilizes the opposition between what might be considered real and fictional by the viewer, Martin Murphy’s *Lost Things* attempts to disrupt the boundaries of the real entirely within the diegetic confines of the story. This is a more fantastic horror film than *Wolf Creek*, and as such plays upon notions of reality for the

⁵⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge: London & New York, 1993), 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 65.

characters. In terms of Todorov's conception of the fantastic – the uncertainty experienced when faced with the ambiguity of an event which cannot be explained – both characters and viewers are left with a prolonged period of uncertainty, unable to distinguish whether or not the narrative events are an illusion.⁶¹ For Todorov, the fantastic is the feeling that lasts for the duration of this uncertainty, and in the case of *Lost Things*, the uncertainty is never fully removed. Normally this situation results in a decision, the characters must opt for an explanation of their supernatural situation, but *Lost Things* draws out the period of this uncertainty, and does not allow a clear decision to be reached. Modleski suggests that horror films “delight in thwarting the audiences’ expectations of closure,”⁶² and this is certainly the case with *Lost Things*.

The narrative concerns four teenagers who venture out on a camping and surfing weekend, only to become trapped (through devices that remain unknowable), as they gradually discover that they have in fact been the victims of a murderer. The holiday in the bush is certainly a powerful repeated situation in Australian cinema, and the results are usually dire. As a film-making nation, there seems to be a deep mistrust of the rural environment and its inhabitants, human or otherwise. As a result, like the other films covered in this chapter, *Lost Things* hails a series of other films, and this textual tracing allows us to access a range of perspectives for interpretation. A number of Australian films seem relevant for comparison as the narrative develops, but *Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston) seems appropriate here. Discussed in more length in Chapter Two, *Long Weekend* centres on a married couple on a camping holiday in an apparently actively malevolent environment. While the premise of the film is entirely different, *Long Weekend* shared the attempt to defamiliarize an Australian cultural

⁶¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre* (Cornell University Press: New York, 1975), 25.

⁶² Modleski, 160.

icon – the beach – in order to create a malevolent, dangerous and unpredictable environment. It is not the landscape itself that provides the threat in *Lost Things*, but rather the characters' strange predicament within the location, although of course, this only becomes clear towards the end of the film.

Martin Murphy explains something of the shifting nature of the Australian landscape in relation to his motivation for *Lost Things*.

I knew we could make it work, absolutely. I had so many experiences growing up in the country where I've been somewhere on my own, and because you think that you see someone out of the corner of your eye, suddenly a peaceful paddock has a menace ... The environment might be benign, and then you think there's someone else there at the campsite that you don't know. The stakes rise; there can be a shift. Sometimes it's just a cloud moving across and everything getting a bit darker and cooler, it just changes the mood of the environment.⁶³

I think it is valuable to place these comments in comparison to the following passage from McLean, who stated that “[t]he Australian outback is fabulous, but in the blink of an eye it can become a cold, emotionless, natural world that doesn't care if you are dying”⁶⁴ Murphy's ideas are remarkably close to McLean's. Both *Lost Things* and *Wolf Creek* presuppose a landscape that is inherently unable to be relied upon. Further to this, both directors hint at a deep mistrust that, I believe, sits somewhere just below the surface of popular consciousness. This mistrust is brought into being, literally, in an instant, and remains a preoccupation not just of horror films, but of the full spectrum of Australian films that deal with survival in the landscape, as covered in Chapter Two.

⁶³ Dave Hoskin, “Edgy and Experimental and Weird: A Conversation with Martin Murphy and Ian Iveson,” *Metro* 143 (2004): 20.

⁶⁴ McLean and Jarratt, 18.

The distinction between land and ocean, in a similar way to *Wolf Creek*, is emphasized. The teenagers appear physically unable to enter the water, and again, like *Wolf Creek*, the ocean appears to be a physical representation of freedom from the land, and landscape. Emily's inconsistent behaviour and the boys' total failure to actually go surfing are the most obvious narrative devices employed. Emily, it turns out, has organized the camping trip, apparently at the behest of the strange Zippo, and her interaction with Zippo during his reappearance, as though he is unknown despite his familiarity, is an indication of the temporal uncertainty. The narrative seems to struggle its way free from the grasp of coherent temporal organization, to evade attempts at the logical construction of a timeline based on narrative information. The four are stuck, inescapably, in their road trip, apparently cursed to forever relive the horrors of their holiday over and over again. Murphy has explained the film as something of an attempt to express Nietzsche's idea of eternal return.⁶⁵ The narrative arc begins and ends at the same point, yet at no point are we aware how many times the characters have been at *this* particular juncture in time. The repetitive nature of the teenagers' experience is cued in the varying shots of each of them staring out into the ocean, silent and still, when it seems logically impossible that they could be there, as they are seen only moments before, or after, in entirely different locations.

The Australian films discussed here are so varied as to make it difficult to consider them a part of a unified category, yet they share much common ground. I suggest that the following passage from Peter Hutchings is highly relevant here:

A point often made is that cult films are excessive. They offer scenes of spectacle that exceed any narrative function and which go beyond the scenes of licensed or permitted excess found in the mainstream. Or their subject matter, or their treatment of that subject matter, is perceived as excessive, breaching

⁶⁵ Martin Murphy, audio commentary, *Lost Things* DVD.

conventional notions of good taste or what is permitted in the mainstream. Often connected with this is a sense of the potential for transgression in cult; cult films transgress and offer a challenge to norms, whether these be the aesthetic norms of commercial mainstream filmmaking or broader social and ideological norms. Cult films also tend to be seen as marginal – in terms of their location within critically disreputable genres such as horror, or marginal in terms of box-office failure, or, with films that were financially successful, marginal inasmuch as they have the capacity to sustain alternative – usually ironic – readings of them.⁶⁶

Very much in agreement with Hutchings' assertion, this chapter has repeatedly returned to the idea of transgression as a pervasive undercurrent; the crossing of boundaries and the narrative effect of such, and more widely, the opportunities for analysis this raises. Kristeva's abject is absolutely central to this idea, as are the positions suggested by Tudor, Williams, Krasniewicz, Freeland and others, all of whom recognize the importance of the way in which horror cinema operates in the spaces between common - usually socially defined - binary oppositions.

However, Modleski points out that for all the postmodern grandstanding and championing of 'low' art, many theorists still have a tendency to posit objects of mass culture in opposition to the critical standpoint they themselves adopt, owing particularly to the apparent consumer pleasure that mass culture supposedly brings.⁶⁷ The challenge to horror cinema, then, remains. Is it nothing more than an efferent conduit through which transgressive moral material is regulated and expelled? I suggest that the question so often posed by cinephiles, popular critics and even legislators, as to why horror films should even be tolerated, to say nothing of being taken 'seriously', can be answered by mobilising the kinds of theory I have covered here, and asserting that the commodity status of cinematic texts does *not* detract from their potential as cultural artifacts. Adrian Martin has argued that "[f]ilm more than

⁶⁶ Hutchings, 132.

⁶⁷ Modleski, 157.

any other medium glorifies the immediate and the visceral,”⁶⁸ and the horror film might be the logical extreme of this claim, prying open the physical and social world. The popular press has tended towards reductionist critiques of horror films, emphasising socio-cultural concerns elicited directly from narratives in a literal fashion. I have attempted to avoid this kind of critique, but it is important, in an industrial sense, to recognise the way popular press have engaged with these films. Dave Hoskin has recently claimed that “[t]he hard-edged horror of the late sixties and seventies was clearly influenced by Vietnam, and given recent global events it’s tempting to wonder whether something similar is happening again.”⁶⁹ While I have been reluctant to ascribe such a direct link between film and culture, the tendency of recent horror films towards deeply psychological terrors suggests a change in the range of cultural concerns that are currently finding expression.

⁶⁸ Adrian Martin, “Getting Down and Dirty: Grunge Movies,” *Cinema Papers* 133 (2000), 28.

⁶⁹ Dave Hoskin, “Big bad ‘Wolf Creek,’” *Metro* 145 (2005): 22.

Chapter Five - Australian Science Fiction: Resistance is Futile



Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998)

The focus of this chapter is science fiction cinema; a genre that does not exhibit an accomplished history in this country. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Australian Cinema, as a national cinema, demonstrates a tendency towards stories in which the emphasis is placed predominantly on modest, human aspects of the narrative, even when those stories participate in genres like science fiction and horror.¹ The last two decades have been a boom period for Australian science fiction television, specifically in series written for young adults, but this is a trend that is not mirrored in the cinema industry.² Relative to other media, science fiction has been consistently under-represented in the catalogue of Australian cinema, despite the increased genre-based production subsequent to the introduction of the 10BA tax laws.³ This under-representation in production has an obvious consequence in the lack of critical uptake of the genre. I would tentatively suggest that this lack of attention is in part because science fiction films necessarily contain somewhat less obvious thematic elements of uniquely Australian concerns. I would also argue that they have suffered, on the whole, from lower production quality, which alienates them from popular attention, and in an industrial environment in which conditions are dictated by the drive for economic stability and national relevance, reduces the focus of critical and theoretical attention.

¹ O'Regan explains this notion in relation to Rolf de Heer's *Incident at Raven's Gate* (1989), to be discussed later in this chapter, in which a love triangle overshadows the elements of the narrative that would mark it as a science fiction text. Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 207, 262.

² Sean McMullen, "Shot in Australia: Written Just About Everywhere," in *Projections: Science Fiction in Literature and Film*, ed. Lou Anders (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2004), 209-224.

³ In 1978, the Australian Government introduced tax concessions for investment in film production in the 10B and 10BA divisions of the Income Tax Assessment Act 1936. This is now commonly referred to as simply 10BA. The tax incentives were scaled back in 1988 with the establishment of the Australian Film Finance Corporation. "Investing in our Culture," *Creative Nation, Commonwealth Cultural Policy, October 1994* (8 January 2006). <<http://www.nla.gov.au/creative.nation/invest.html>>

I want to assert, however, that the genre of science fiction cinema, in Australia, does indeed offer opportunities to identify and examine undercurrents of a similar order to those discussed in the other chapters of this dissertation. This chapter therefore commences by examining the indeterminate relationship between the genres of horror and science fiction, in order to take advantage of the intersections between texts and theories of these genres. I have then extended this into an account of the science fiction film in the cultural milieu, returning to the links between reality and representation - a culture and its artifacts - before engaging with Todorov's conception of the fantastic. I have then pursued ideas relating to the spectacle of film, as this is a particularly pertinent concern for genre which necessarily foregrounds the visually spectacular. I then scrutinize a selection of common narrative elements of science fiction, to enable the traversal of oppositional theoretical perspectives on the perceived 'conservativeness' of the genre. This is an important consideration in the context of this thesis, as readings of science fiction texts in relation to social, cultural and political circumstances form the basis for understanding the relationship between science fiction and the other groups of films I cover in this project. In short, science fiction is included as a chapter in this thesis because of the theoretical ground it shares with the other sections that I will identify, and elaborate on, in this chapter.

Then follows a series of film analyses, and I have chosen to engage initially with a selection of Australian science fiction films that display something in the way of an Australian mise-en-scene, either wholly or partially. These films are *Incident at Raven's Gate* (de Heer, 1989), *One Night Stand* (Duigan, 1984), *The Time Guardian* (Hannant, 1987), and *As Time Goes By* (Peak, 1988). I will then discuss *Mad Max* (Miller, 1982), and *Dark City* (Proyas, 1998). *Dark City* in particular is an important

film to discuss here, inasmuch as it poses questions about the relationship between science fiction and Australian national cinema with respect to what constitutes an 'Australian' film. The textual analyses of Australian science fiction films move through ideas about the spectacular nature of the texts, the issues of social conservatism, and the relationship that narrative elements of science fiction construct with culture. The analysis reveals a distinct undercurrent of futility of action in the social realm, as characters are routinely at the whim of their situation, unable to effect change on circumstances in any really meaningful way. Moral universality is subordinate to relative, situational judgments, and a perspective of helplessness in the face of a socio-cultural system that is beyond the control of the individual runs through the narratives dealt with hereunder.

Horror and Science Fiction

The overlap in the theoretical foundations between this and the preceding chapter is an inevitable result of a wider overlap in the history of investigation into horror and science fiction. These genres have intersected to the extent that the words have at times been ostensibly interchangeable as labels. While the different perspectives on narrative formulation to be mentioned in this chapter serve to distinguish and separate the two genres, they also highlight the history of narrative and theoretical common ground. As such this chapter borrows, partially, some of the key issues that horror theory has interrogated, in particular, concerns of the challenge to certain binary oppositions present in narratives, and the emphasis on many thematic concerns that hail the discourses of postmodernism, such as paranoia, anxiety, the questioning of stable and coherent identities, and so on. The intersections of horror and science fiction films can be easily and obviously demonstrated with examples from

Hollywood. The narrative devices of a scientifically significant setting (normally, but not necessarily, outer space), and an unknown or mysterious threat have proved to be a very successful combination. Large budget productions like the *Alien* series (Scott, 1979; Cameron, 1986; Fincher, 1992; Jeunet, 1997; Anderson, 2004), *Sphere* (Levinson, 1998), *Event Horizon* (Anderson, 1997) and, to a lesser extent, *Leviathan* (Cosmatos, 1989) and *The Abyss* (Cameron, 1989), all mobilize this particular narrative configuration, illustrating questions of shared generic conventions. It is therefore pertinent to pay attention to the social and discursive formulation of the science fiction genre, in an attempt to unpack some of the ways science fiction intersects with other genres, and functions in relation to cultural circumstances, as well as formulating some ideas about the elements of science fiction that distinguish it from horror.

The similarities in subject matter and critical uptake have necessitated a theoretical untangling of science fiction and horror cinema. Barry Keith Grant has attempted to delineate the genres to add some clarity to his own investigation of the primacy of spectacle in science fiction cinema. He suggests that “the two genres offer experiences and pleasures strikingly different, in fact almost opposite, in nature.”⁴ He goes on to say that “[v]ision in horror tales tends to focus down and inward [...] while science fiction gazes up and out.”⁵ For Grant there is a clear and very marked distinction in the narrative appeal to explanation that he extends into the specific narrative threat. The thematic aspect (the metaphorical direction of ‘vision’) Grant isolates is almost diametrically opposed in science fiction and horror. Generally

⁴ Barry Keith Grant, “‘Sensuous Elaboration’: Reason and the Visible in the Science Fiction Film,” in *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

speaking, where horror seeks explanations within the (sometimes primitive) darkness of the mind and body, science fiction looks into the mysteries of science and the universe. The distinction between the psychological and empirical, both as explanatory mechanisms, and as systems of social organization, then, is critical to the disposition of science fiction.

Further to this, Grant identifies the nature of the ‘creature’ in horror and science fiction as fundamentally different, claiming that “[i]n horror, creatures are monstrous violations of ideological norms, while in science fiction monsters are often simply a different life form.”⁶ These differences do not appeal to a necessary difference in the threat itself in science fiction and horror, but rather to a different explanatory fallback position, a different reason for the existence of the threat, and consequently, a different response. The simultaneous yet opposed narrative drives, on one hand, to destroy, and on the other, to harness (for the military scientists) the monstrous alien in the *Alien* series illustrates this point. To distinguish based on these conditions, horror invokes the fundamentally unknowable threat - abject and needing to be expelled, often through death - whereas science fiction tends towards representing the threat as the as-yet unknown, to be understood, and assimilated into institutionalized knowledge. In terms of the *Alien* series, categories that exist on opposite sides of Grant’s line between horror and science fiction, when merged, result in a text equally at home in either genre, as the dual explanatory mechanism are present equally in the narrative. Grant also contends that:

[t]he fundamental difference between science fiction and horror is conventionally represented within the two genres themselves as a differing emphasis on the mind (science fiction) and the body (horror).⁷

⁶ Grant, 19.

⁷ Grant, 20.

This distinction leans on the notion of the rational, reasoning mind of institutional knowledge, in the form of scientific discovery or authority, and requires some qualification. Grodal writes:

Often horror fiction deals with cognitive control, but [...] the effort to gain cognitive control is mostly derived from a motivation to maintain personal body and mind autonomy, which is under severe attack from uncontrollable phenomena.⁸

Much material in the recent history of horror has focussed very powerfully on the mind, and its disintegration. Grant's distinction, then, can be augmented by Grodal's observation, and aligned with common binary oppositions such as reason/emotion, or rational/irrational, and even culture/nature. For Grant science fiction occupies the rational side of these dichotomies, and horror the irrational. The function of the mind within horror is simply to control itself, whereas the mind in science fiction seeks a larger destiny. Where science fiction turns to rational explanations and the mechanics of scientific knowledge, horror tends towards forging solutions through emotional responses, rather than reasoning – the power of the body to overcome a threat to its integrity, as opposed to the power of scientific knowledge to overcome a much more widespread threat. Where Grant sees this final distinction as the most fundamental, I would argue that it is potentially the most troublesome, and it needs to be considered as an extension of his earlier distinctions between the 'inward' and 'outward' nature of the thematic content.

⁸ Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings and Cognition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 236.

Science Fiction and the Cultural Milieu

I want to assert that the critical potential of science fiction cinema, given the context here of a national cinema, is, in some measure, a result of the “spatial and temporal distance from the here and now.”⁹ This distance is not necessarily a barrier between a narrative and its social relevance, and in the case of Australian science fiction, the separation of the mise-en-scene from real, contemporary locations - the distance between narrative possibilities and our own social and technological circumstances – sharpens the focus of those examinations that deal most directly with social, human concerns. These concerns can be highlighted and explored by mobilising Kuhn’s suggestion that science fiction is prone to theoretical engagements that seek to establish wider cultural explanations for thematic trajectories. As she suggests, “...largely untheorized, is an assumption that science fiction films operate within a network of meanings [...] which extends beyond the films themselves.”¹⁰ This is a cautionary observation, and Kuhn alludes to theories prioritising broad social significance in film analysis, and, in particular, the thematic content of films is emphasized in this kind of analysis. General examples of this trend, as discussed in Chapter One, can be found in the invasion narratives of the 1940s and 1950s that are generally regarded as strongly related to the cultural paranoia in the United States at the time in relation to Communism.¹¹

The necessarily human proportions of narrative focus in science fiction cinema in Australia, when placed in the context of an assumed social significance of its thematic

⁹ Annette Kuhn, “Cultural Theory and Science Fiction Cinema”, Introduction to *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 15.

¹⁰ Kuhn, 7.

¹¹ See Andrew Tudor, “Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre,” *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (1997), 443-463.

content, are therefore emphasized as the elements of narrative that offer meaningful and potentially resistive uptake of these texts, rather than the more spectacular aspects of the mise-en-scene or plot. Assuming a social dimension to these narratives in this manner is, of course, not a theoretical position I would advocate without contextualization. In Chapter One I argued that the link between text and viewer, like the link between culture and artifact, is a site of contestation over meaning, and is, put simply, a link that is in neither direct nor unmediated. Consequently, it is prudent to take a more cautionary approach to the analysis of social significance in cinematic texts. Examination of the space that exists between cinema and its originating culture, and the links and networks of meaning that occupy that space, is a process that participates in the larger philosophical problem of the distinctions between reality and representation, as Kuhn notes:

These arguments in turn raise questions about the relationship between cultural practices and the 'real world', between films or film genres and society. Critics wary of the distinction between representation and reality which underlies these arguments may argue instead that science fiction films participate in intertexts – in broader systems of cultural meaning.¹²

For Kuhn, the problematic assumption that films directly represent society can be addressed more appropriately, and understood more constructively, if film is taken as an inextricable and mediated part a system of cultural discursive networks and practices, that include both the production of texts, and their critical uptake.

Intertextuality involves complex series of linkages between cultural sites. Gramsci's vision of science as a strong, and deeply socially ingrained contributing element in contemporary folklore, as explained by Marcia Landy, is a notion that emphasizes this strength of meaningful interplay between texts and cultural sites. That is to say, the scientific discourse inevitably cuts across the cinematic discourse, and vice versa.

¹² Kuhn, 8.

Landy suggests that representations of this scientific knowledge therefore permeate the signifying systems within the narratives of science fiction cinema, functioning as “pretexts for exploring questions of history, biology, and medicine.”¹³ This is in keeping with Kuhn’s idea, and suggests that this permeation - the discursive intersections through which science and cinema are informed by each other - generates the spaces within which the thematic importance of science fiction cinema can be appropriately analysed.

The Fantastic, Cinematic Spectacle and the Postmodern

Moving from wider socio-cultural concerns to more specific properties of science fiction narratives, it is useful in this examination to consider the idea of Todorov’s fantastic. In relation to horror literature - the originating context - Noël Carroll explains that the fantastic “renders the supernatural origin of events in the text ambiguous by means of psychologically disturbed characters.”¹⁴ Science fiction is of course not explicitly in the realm of the supernatural,¹⁵ but I want to suggest that this conception of narrative ambiguity resonates strongly in science fiction, despite the

¹³ Marcia Landy, *Film, Politics and Gramsci* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 185-188.

¹⁴ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

¹⁵ Damien Broderick suggests that the usefulness of the fantastic is limited in relation to science fiction, as a result of the incongruous categories of marvellous and supernatural. He explains, that for Todorov:

[k]ey events in narratives of this kind are perforce construed by the reader as neither clearly natural nor supernatural (Todorov tells us), which precipitates a kind of epistemological and even ontological oscillation, with consequent creepy or ghastly affect. [...]

Yet the use of ‘supernatural’, for Broderick, is at odds, from the perspective of science fiction criticism, with Todorov’s own schema of alternative “explanatory regimes” of the uncanny and the marvellous. He explains:

For Todorov, the stuff of science fiction’s narrative has to be ‘natural’, susceptible of scientific or quasi-scientific explanation. Yet one feels certain that his categories would be at least as well served by identifying sf with the marvellous – not supernatural, but the natural not yet understood within the current paradigms of an always fallible and evolving scientific discourse.

Damien Broderick, “SF as a Mode,” *Meridian* 11, no. 2 (1992), 23.

potential difficulty of applying the fantastic to science fiction without contextualization. Todorov writes:

The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses [...] or else the event has indeed taken place [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty.¹⁶

The fantastic, then, is demonstrated as the unease generated out of the necessity to choose between explanatory mechanisms. Todorov “places its effectivity [...] within the reader,”¹⁷ but I want to suggest here that, in the case of science fiction, the vocabulary of the fantastic can be seen as that which sustains, and helps in explaining, the disposition of the characters.

Narrative texts generally demand that this fantastic experience (on the side of the viewer/reader) be temporary, and it is for this reason that I want to suggest that science fiction identifies and locates this hesitation and lack of knowledge (or certainty) in an enduring manner in the characters rather than solely with the viewer.

Steve Neale writes that, “although many works involve the hesitation to which Todorov refers, very few sustain it throughout.”¹⁸ Indeed, the viewer’s range of narrative information is often sufficient to provide explanations immediately for many occurrences in the narrative. The inability of characters, however, to adequately explain the events at hand immediately, when generically contextualized by the absence of any recourse to supernatural explanations, motivates psychological pressures to act, and drive the narrative forward. The characters examined in this section are routinely subject to moments of fantastic uncertainty, which almost invariably results in the raising of questions concerning, at the very least, their sanity,

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25.

¹⁷ Broderick, 22.

¹⁸ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 35.

and more generally, the social hierarchy. This idea is very much reminiscent of Freud's notion of the uncanny, in relation to the psychological forces on character behaviour, and is a thread clearly running through all of the films I examine here.

The fantastic elements of a science fiction narrative are largely associated with visual spectacle, so the spectacular nature of narrative elements and visual effects must be considered. Kuhn suggests that basing a theoretical framework of investigation into a genre on its literary antecedent will, to some extent, always fall short. She argues that the visual aspect of cinema is key to its processes of making meaning: "[t]he peculiar qualities of cinematic storytelling hinge crucially on the very visibility of the film image, and on the fact that 'reading' a film necessarily involves looking at it."¹⁹ Steve Neale illustrates this in describing the process through which spectators access narrative information, and the extent to which disbelief is 'suspended' in film. He considers the system of internal coherence, which the spectator must construct in order to understand the limits of knowledge and circumstance within film texts. He contends that "...the processes and issues of judgement and belief are ultimately focussed – and founded – on what it is we see, and hence ultimately also on the cinematic image and its powers."²⁰ For science fiction, a genre in which visual spectacle is a generic hallmark, considering internal coherence – the structure of the film's realism – as being based strongly on visual qualities is crucially important in critical analysis. A problem arises in that this focus on the visual, according to Grant, has the potential to downplay the significance of the narrative. Grant notes that "[p]opular science fiction movies [...] seem to have succumbed almost entirely to the

¹⁹ Kuhn, 6.

²⁰ Steve Neale, "'You've Got To Be Fucking Kidding!' Knowledge, Belief and Judgement in Science Fiction," in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 164.

siren call of the sensuous spectacle.”²¹ He suggests that the visual splendour of the film medium has “work[ed] to discourage the [...] speculative narrative,” seemingly eschewing the “philosophical attitude” of science fiction.²²

Marcia Landy offers a position that can account for Grant’s problematization by forging links between science fiction and the discourse of postmodernism, in a manner much like that proposed by Allan Lloyd Smith in relation to Gothic fiction outlined in Chapter Four. Landy claims that simulation is the focus of many narratives, and that the breakdown of conceptual binary oppositions to which postmodern theory has directed attention, such as the public and private spheres, is an important site of narrative and thematic criticism in science fiction cinema.²³ The visual aspect of science fiction cinema plays an integral role in supporting these kinds of narrative tendencies, and Grant’s notion that the philosophical aspect of science fiction is undermined by the visual spectacularity underemphasizes the role of the visual in a critical disposition mobilising ideas relating to postmodernism. To make this point clearer, I will turn to Ryan and Kellner, who emphasize the importance of films like *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), which mobilize techniques to make boundaries between dichotomies unclear, and indeed, indistinguishable. Removing the weight of moral commentary that operates by appealing to literality – falling back on the presumed “natural ground” of an authoritative ontology – opens a space for the confusion that exists between dichotomies and categories to offer and create new

²¹ Grant, 28.

²² Ibid. In the same anthology, Brooks Landon explores perspectives on the potential critical problems raised for science fiction film, in contrast with science fiction literature, by the subordination of the narrative to special effects, and the “primacy of spectacle”. See Brooks Landon, “Diegetic or Digital? The Convergence of Science Fiction Literature and Science Fiction Film in Hypermedia”, in *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 31-49.

²³ Landy, 186.

ways of understanding and constructing meanings through figurality and a sense of the constructedness of all categories and oppositions.²⁴ Ryan and Kellner explain the power of the figurality in science fiction cinema as follows:

What rhetoric, like technology, opens is the possibility of an ungrounded play with social institutions, simulating them, substituting for them, reconstructing them, removing them from any ground of literal meaning that would hold them responsible to its authority.²⁵

Science fiction cinema potentially ‘ungrounds’ the foundations on which much conservative cinema sits. Removing the very underpinnings of conservative ideologies by suggesting movement on a continuum between poles, rather than action in subservience to those dichotomies, serves to destabilize the foundations on which any narrative claim to authority is based, particularly those foundations appealing to naturalism or realism.

Despite this, Landy eschews notions of contemporary science fiction being a site of new critical perspectives, but rather suggests that narratives articulating modern expressions of the conception of science simply refigure the already existing critical analysis of science fiction, insinuating that it is essentially a conservative form. She writes, “despite their semblances of articulating new discourses, the films are mired in familiar contradictions concerning continuity and change.”²⁶ Ryan and Kellner support this, arguing that in opposition to the unnatural institutions of the ‘technophobic’ films are the supposedly natural institutions of conservative ideology.²⁷ While science fiction films indeed destabilize and unground the foundations of the internal social order they construct, they do so in relation to an

²⁴ Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, “Technophobia”, in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 64.

²⁵ Ryan and Kellner, 64.

²⁶ Landy, 209.

²⁷ Ryan and Kellner, 59-60.

established status-quo exterior to the narrative – the institutions of conservative ideology. In this light science fiction operates similarly to horror, offering the paradoxical thrill of transgressing boundaries, while ensuring the viewer remains firmly within such boundaries. As with horror, this is not to underplay the potential for these narratives to express subversive desires concerning dominant social systems, rather, it simply contextualizes the grounds of critique.

Australian Examples and One Night Stand

Science fiction shares much with horror, both textually and theoretically, and as such there is much crossover in the kinds of trends identified in terms of narrative elements and intertextual links. Science fiction, within a national cinema, can, and does, contain sets of ideas and culturally specific motifs that serve to elaborate on ideas of nation and nationality, despite the removal, at least partially, of the local setting, and other elements of mise en scene. Science fiction is a genre that, like horror, often serves to reinforce conservative values, particularly those pertaining to the social organization of the family and gender, despite its potential for resistive narratives.

The problems that arise for analysis as a result of the relative scarcity of science fiction films in the Australian industry are compounded by the diversity of the films that comprise this small group. However, even among the highly disparate thematic, narrative and stylistic dispositions, some threads of resemblance can be isolated.²⁸

The films I have gathered together here demonstrate that paranoia, mistrust of

²⁸ I use the phrase ‘threads of resemblance’, derived partially from Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance, to describe the networks of changing stylistic and narrative textual intersections and overlaps that are more suitable to the delineation of generic conventions than strict, formula-based systems of classification. See David Thomas and Garry Gillard, “Threads of Resemblance in New Australian Gothic Cinema,” *Metro* 136 (2003), 36-44.

authority, and a general sense of alienation from the systems of social organization are evident throughout Australian science fiction films. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the 1980s saw a number of highly generic science fiction films emerge in Australia. Since then, the science fiction films produced in Australia have either tended towards a distinctly Australian tone, (e.g. *One Night Stand* and *The Time Guardian*) or contrastingly, far less emphasis on anything uniquely Australian (e.g. *Dark City* and *Pitch Black* (Twohy, 2001)).

Skimming through some of the entries in the Australian science fiction filmography quickly reveals the diversity of this group of films. *Turkey Shoot* (Trenchard-Smith, 1982) uses a 1984-esque society as the backdrop for a work camp for political dissenters. While not displaying much in the way of uniquely Australian concerns, *Turkey Shoot* uses the landscape in a familiar fashion, pitting the survival skills of humans against each other in an unforgiving and difficult setting. *Dead-End Drive In* (Trenchard-Smith, 1986) is based on Peter Carey's short story 'Crabs', and, like *Mad Max*, presents a "bleak and almost apocalyptic environment" in which "survivors pick at the carcass of the car culture."²⁹ Despite being criticized for failing to retain much of the sharp social satire of the short story on which it is based,³⁰ this is a film that generates an Australian tone, and mobilizes some recognizable cultural assumptions (and shortcomings) concerning masculinity, ethnicity and car culture, framed by a dystopic vision of the future of social organization and personal relationships.

²⁹ Rebecca Johnke, "Misogyny, Muscles and Machines: Cars and Masculinity in Australian Literature," *Australian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2000), 97.

³⁰ See Theodore F. Sheckels, "Filming Peter Carey: From the Adequate to the Distorted," *Antipodes* 13, no. 2 (1999), 91-94.

Crosstalk (Egerton, 1982) is a story about an apparently sentient computer system that, when threatened with being scrapped, takes measures into its own ‘hands’, while its crippled creator and his nurse try to understand what is happening. The plot is not particularly or specifically Australian, and has been called “a rather unashamed remake of *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956),”³¹ and as most of the action takes place inside the crippled man’s rented apartment, the scope for social or cultural relevance in interpretation is limited, yet there is a sense in this film that the corporate corruption which leads to the murders is inescapable and all-pervasive. *Body Melt*, mentioned already in this thesis in relation to horror, situates its characters in a bizarre suburban nightmare of medical technology gone awry, simultaneously articulating a parody of the consumerist nature of the suburban dream, and the malevolence of corporate organizations. *Body Melt* develops something of a caricature of late 1980s Australian suburbia, with all the excesses and naivety commonly associated with the social climate of the time. *Pitch Black* is an example of the complete lack of significant or unique Australian narrative elements in a film made in Australia. It is a joint Australian and American production, in which the desolate landscape³² of a planet inhabited by nocturnal predators serves as the backdrop to the ethical dilemma of a crew who need the help of a convicted criminal they are transporting. There is a link, albeit a tenuous one, with other films mentioned here pertaining to the “intriguing moral ambiguity [...] which surrounds convicted murderer Riddick.”³³ These films mobilize an uncertain aspect towards concrete moral standards, and are suggestive of the desire for a moral schema that is relative, and contextualized based

³¹ Scott Murray, “Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s,” in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray, 71-148 (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 97.

³² *Pitch Black* was filmed around Coober Pedy in South Australia. *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller and George Ogilvie, 1985), and *Red Planet* (Antony Hoffman, 2000) were also filmed in this location.

³³ Daniel Etherington, “Pitch Black,” *Sight and Sound* 10, no. 8 (2000), 55.

on situation, rather than universally. This is a group of films in which, quite frequently, seemingly questionable moral decisions are made in the name of utilitarian outcomes. This tendency will be examined further, and more closely, in relation to crime films in Chapter Six.

Subterano (Storm, 2003) is a text that exists somewhere on the dirty boundary between science fiction and horror.³⁴ It is set primarily in a multi-level car park, where each ‘level’ seems to correspond to the levels in a computer game, needing to be completed in order for a dwindling number of players to advance and escape. The futuristic mise-en-scene makes it difficult to say this film is situated in an identifiably *typical* Australian location; however, this is not a generic city of the future, but rather, a decaying Sydney. Also set in Sydney, and worthy of lengthier mention here, is *One Night Stand*. Behind the colourful 1980s exterior is a surprisingly weighty film that I imagine laid the foundation for the vulgar take on a similar premise in Ray Boseley’s *Smoke ‘Em if You Got ‘Em* (1988). Four young adults find themselves stranded in the Sydney Opera House during the opening hours of a nuclear war.

The narrative infers paranoia about the intentions of the invisible, detached governments that bring about the war, and highlights a sense of futility in attempting to control personal destiny in the face of monumental events such as war. Cyndy Hendershot suggests that, “as a psychic defense mechanism, paranoia takes the sting out of history by draining it of its human responsibility and placing it in

³⁴ I use the word ‘dirty’ here in the manner proposed by John Hartley, in *Tele-ology: Studies in Television* (London: Routledge, 1992), 23-24. Hartley suggests that ‘dirt’ represents “ambiguous boundaries” between categories that are resistant to “clean” opposition.

eschatological/mythological space and time.”³⁵ I would argue that this is partially the work, the cultural instrumentality - mentioned in Chapter One - of the science fiction genre. Hendershot claims the process of mythologizing (specifically the atomic bomb) serves to reduce the human aspect of the technology. In post-war America, the bomb was not a weapon created by people, but rather an instrument given by God to conquer evil foes.³⁶ *One Night Stand* certainly performs this relocation of the danger, or the threat arising from technology. The threat is displaced, and ceases to be a matter of individual responsibility, and becomes something beyond the control of any one person. The continual disbelief, bordering on denial, and futility of action engendered by the four characters suggests that ‘average’ people, the ordinary citizens of cities and countries, are almost completely separated from the crazed governments and authorities that, through their illogical actions, bring about nuclear war.

One Night Stand was produced during a period in which the theme of nuclear war was something of a preoccupation in science fiction films. *War Games* (Badham, 1983), *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984), *The Day After* (Meyer, 1983) and *Threads* (Jackson, 1984), were all released at around the same time, and dealt largely with the same thematic material. Tony Morphet puts this down to the political climate, and the social tension arising from nuclear proliferation, claiming that “[p]eople who work in movies are just like anyone else: they live and breathe in a climate of opinion.”³⁷ Morphet’s simple observation illustrates the powerful intersections between socio-political circumstances and cinema output, emphasising the importance in cinema analysis not only of the nodes of convergence of social discourses, but also the

³⁵ Cyndy Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁷ Tony Morphet, “Singing in the Fall Out,” *Quadrant* 28, no. 5 (1984), 57.

personal and public crossovers. Important relationships are consistently presented as distinctly local and familial, as the breakdown of ‘superpowers’ forces the characters to lose confidence in social order. In directly implicating the ‘madness’ of nuclear war, the film suggestively attacks the logic of any thought of the existence of a benevolent God in the face of such, and the distinction between individual and nation. This last issue draws attention to a thread running through all the films in this chapter that seems to demonstrate a desire to turn away from centralization, from overarching technological power and the powerful apparatus of government, towards a more humanist lifestyle validating individual relationships over national loyalty.

Essentially, Australian science fiction reproduces many narrative and thematic elements common to science fiction more generally, but in its local articulations, manages to develop a thematic tone that reverberates with local political concerns, even in narratives such as *One Night Stand* that deal explicitly with an international situation. It is still very clear, however, that Australian science fiction films are a fairly loosely assembled category, and so, analyses rely on links between texts that are more akin to threads of resemblance rather than directly shared features that would be suggestive of a generic formula or pattern.

Incident at Raven’s Gate, As Time Goes By and The Time Guardian

The following films go some way towards supporting Marcia Landy’s assertion that “[t]he urban landscape and especially the subterranean aspects of the city – the sewers and the gutters – have become in science fiction the spawning sites of the monstrous,

of disease, and of mutations.”³⁸ For *Incident at Raven’s Gate*, *As Time Goes By*, and *The Time Guardian*, the rural setting is contrasted sharply with people and situations associated with the city. These texts support Landy’s idea by affirming the opposite. These are films in which the intruders - the aliens and technology - are marked as significantly ‘out-of-place’. *Incident at Raven’s Gate* sees the ‘expert’ arriving from the city, *As Time Goes By* positions the visitor from the city as the source of trouble, and *The Time Guardian* presents a situation in which the city itself relocates to the country, and brings the monstrous mutations with it.

Early in *Incident at Raven’s Gate*, Bill, the disturbed owner of the Raven’s Gate farm, issues a warning to the main protagonist, Eddie, telling him: “there’s a lot you don’t know mate, stay away from Raven’s Gate”. Fittingly, this is a film in which lack of information plays a crucial role in establishing the tension between both characters and situations. As mentioned, *Incident at Raven’s Gate* is a film that sets its story of alien encounters against a complicated network of private and public social interaction. In the main, the narrative follows the story of the aforementioned Cleary brothers, Eddie and Richard, and the tension in their relationship. An apparently insurmountable emotional and social divide exists between the brothers, made clear when Eddie - who has grown up in the city, and returned to his brother’s farm after spending time in prison - becomes increasingly attracted to Richard’s wife, Rachel. This triangle develops while a series of unexplained misfortunes strike the farm, which, unknown to the brothers, are the result of a crashed alien vessel on the neighbouring property called Raven’s Gate. The strange incidents become

³⁸ Landy, 185-186.

progressively worse, and while attempting to uncover the cause, Eddie discovers that Bill and his wife have been killed.

After finding the mutilated corpses at Raven's Gate, Eddie returns to the Cleary farm. Richard suspects he is making the story up, creating excuses for his apparent mistakes on the farm, but nonetheless, reluctantly, ventures out to Raven's Gate, only to be attacked by the aliens and transformed into a crazed zombie-like creature himself. He then attempts to kill Eddie and Rachel unsuccessfully, and is killed by the aliens as they destroy the Cleary house. A somewhat peculiar return to order follows, and the reinstated equilibrium demonstrates a morally ambiguous outlook towards conservative family values, as Eddie and Rachel return to the perfectly restored home. Rayner notes the odd moral perspective of the narrative, as the adulterous Rachel and Eddie are set free to continue their relationship and the murder of several people is largely ignored. He suggests "the film ascribes the worst intentions and actions to the most superficially reputable characters [...] and punishes them with death."³⁹

Much of the cause and effect chain is based on the small town's convoluted network of relationships, particularly those in which there is an issue of power at stake. Tension results from the uneasy, polarized relationships, and the implications they pose. Rayner suggests that "[s]exual tensions distract the residents from the increasingly bizarre occurrences in the area. It seems that unpredictable and violent incidents of human origin outweigh in importance those caused by extra-terrestrials."⁴⁰ At points it seems as though the portion of the film that participates in the science fiction genre is a narrative anomaly, given this myriad of social concerns.

³⁹ Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 34

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

Eddie consistently clashes with Skinner, the opera loving local policeman, which is a situation primarily arising from their rivalry over the affections of Annie, the barmaid. A secretive scientist, Hemmings, is investigating the alien incident, and has something of a one-sided power struggle with Taylor, a visiting policeman, who is also investigating Raven's Gate. In the first act of the film, there is a physical and verbal confrontation between Hemmings and Taylor, encapsulating the struggle between the levels of authority each represents. Taylor's social power as a police officer is made useless in the face of the authority of science, and presumably secret branches of government, and it becomes clear he has inadequate resources and knowledge to deal with the situation. The futility of Taylor's struggle for power is compounded, physically and metaphorically, when the much smaller Hemmings easily shrugs off an attack by the larger man, throwing him onto the ground and into submission. This struggle over authority ultimately concludes when, at the end of the film, Hemmings murders Taylor, reaffirming his above-the-law status.

The film explores the authority of the discourse of science directly throughout the narrative. While the social mechanisms of the somewhat unsophisticated township are destabilized by the alien presence, they are effectively normalized by the equally mysterious and powerful scientist. At no point does Hemmings appear to be a saviour, and this is suggestive of the distinct mistrust of science as a benevolent cultural discourse evident throughout the narrative. The relationship Hemmings has with the town and its people is indicative of a series of binary divisions established by the film. The poles of country and city are paralleled with the poles of human and alien, which has the effect of placing Hemmings and the aliens at the same level of removal, both in terms of knowledge and power, from the people of the town. The mistrust towards

the aliens engendered by the film is equally directed towards the secretive and cruel scientist who restores the social order subsequent to the aliens leaving the area. The actions of the characters appear futile, for the most part, and the major struggle, while not explicitly represented on screen, seems to be played out between the scientist and the aliens.

This is a narrative punctuated by a heavy dose of clichéd rural Australian male characters and concerns. The population of men are almost invariably seen drinking, getting into fights, and insulting each other's sexuality. Despite the bizarre local goings on, and the complex and tense relationship struggles in the town, the most serious crime appears to be the theft of the town's football trophy from the pub. Furthermore, the Cleary brothers are able to temporarily suspend their significant personal and social differences over a beer, despite the undercurrent of mistrust and malice between them. *Incident at Raven's Gate* takes up the cultural divide between city and country in other ways in the relationships between Eddie and Richard, Eddie and Skinner, and also between Hemmings and Taylor. The brothers, for example, are constantly at odds over the workload on the farm, Richard believing Eddie to be lazy and irresponsible. The nature of these relationships carries the implication that the 'city' is a site of crime and moral decay, of arrogance and laziness, and conversely the country is the site of, among other things, 'honest' hard work, integrity, and a lack of bureaucratic entanglements between crime and punishment (evident during a highway showdown between Eddie and Skinner).

Ultimately the aliens are never actually present on screen, and visual signs of the aliens are minimal, leaving character and viewer alike in the position of inferring

causes. There are moments of hesitation that are very suggestive of the notion of fantastic mentioned earlier, particularly as Skinner sees the dead couple from Raven's Gate clawing frantically across the bonnet of his car. The depth of narrative information is not made clear, leaving this scene firmly in within the realm of both hallucination and filmic reality, and therefore disconnected from any sufficiently clear explanation. Skinner's growing mental instability leads ultimately to the murder of Annie, and his escape to Sydney. Outside of these semi-hallucinatory sequences, the actual presence of aliens is only ever hinted at through the deteriorating mise-en-scene, and they are never directly present on screen. Atmospheric conditions consistently decline as the narrative progresses, and concurrent with this, the soundtrack periodically degenerates into nonsensical animal noises and a sharp, disordered and dissonant musical score, which is not unlike that accompanying the destruction of Paris during *The Cars That Ate Paris*. The climax and return to order, as noted, does little to assuage the moral murkiness of this film, and as Eddie and Rachel return to their rebuilt house, it seems that the social and moral problems posed in this narrative are only able to be dealt with at the most pragmatic and superficial level. None of the many social problems the film develops have been addressed, rather, they have simply been diverted through death and disaster.

As Time Goes By is a contrasting text to *Incident at Raven's Gate*, particularly given their many similarities. They occupy a rural setting, and the human concerns track a close path. The narrative moves through a troubled love story, a struggle between police and scientists, and an alien presence. Scott Murray has suggested that this film is little more than a cheap attempt at marketable comedy, tacked onto the end of a trend in the 1980s towards attaining a laugh at the expense of other, perhaps more

desirable filmic qualities.⁴¹ I would suggest that while this film is not likely to be considered the greatest of achievements in Australian cinema history, this is nonetheless an overly harsh assessment. While the comedic intent certainly makes *As Time Goes By* a demonstrably a less ‘serious’ text than the others mentioned in this chapter, it is a narrative that contains an earnest tone beneath the flippant and colourful exterior, implying a sense of futility within everyday life, and in particular, everyday life in the outback.

The familiar cinematic backdrop of the unforgiving, vast (and dead) emptiness of the outback serves as a basis for the fairly ‘ordinary’ concerns of the struggles between people and environment present in the narrative. A young woman is operating a farm on her own, left to her after the death of her father, and the entire town’s population seem to struggle to survive the rough conditions of the outback, with the exception of a rich businessman, who is attempting to make money in the region by sabotaging others. Generally speaking, much like *Incident at Raven’s Gate*, *As Time Goes By* uses a fairly standard collection of eccentric caricatures of rural males.⁴² These characters are disrupted, however, by a young surfer named Mike, and the narrative follows the circumstances of his journey to this small outback town. Mike has to keep an appointment made for him twenty-five years earlier, of which he has no details other than a time and place, scribbled in a semi-cryptic note from his mother. The note explains that his life had been saved as a child, and that in return, he needs to keep the appointment. The narrative is deliberately quite frivolous in its treatment of cause and effect, and coincidences abound.

⁴¹ Scott Murray, “Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s,” in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 115.

⁴² Richard Scheib, “As Time Goes By,” *The Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review* (8 February 2006). <<http://moria.co.nz/sf/astimegoesby.htm>>

The friends with whom Mike is initially travelling abandon him on the roadside, and a local policeman picks him up. He is taken to the home of a young woman who is an acquaintance of the policeman. Mike befriends her very quickly, and explains that he must go to 'Joe Bogart's', presuming this to be the name of a local, but after providing a brief description of the location, the woman informs Mike that is nothing but empty land. Mike subsequently finds Joe Bogart's Diner unintentionally after happening upon an old man collecting bones, who mentions the name while rambling almost incoherently. Joe Bogart turns out to be a blend of 1950s musical and filmic iconography; an alien who speaks using a variety of clichéd cinema 'voices', and travels in a spaceship that is a replica of a diner. Bogart gives Mike a mission to find a part of the spaceship that he needs to get off Earth, but simultaneously, a scientist and the rich businessman are also alerted to the alien presence. Several twists ensue, as Mike is at first kidnapped by the scientist, who has designs on a Nobel Prize, and then realizes that he needs to effect several events in order to save the policeman from being murdered, and to help Joe Bogart leave Earth. The plot is resolved through a series of small and improbable jumps through time, thanks to Joe Bogart's cocktail shaker acting as a time travelling device, and in closing it is revealed that Mike's father, who he never knew, is actually the policeman.

In contrast to *Incident at Raven's Gate*, the scientist in question here is something of a bumbling fool, and the plot, while using a few temporal shifts for effect, has far less serious implications for the characters that are evident in *Incident at Raven's Gate*. Susan Dermody notes that "[t]he strange ensemble of actors and acting styles is

woven into a light but often engaging plot, full of playful cross-cuts.”⁴³ In demonstration of the conception of the fantastic as hesitation between the knowable and unknowable, and its impact on characters, *Incident at Raven’s Gate*, and *As Time Goes By* are narratives in which “the impact of the strange force on the different characters and their relationship with each other drives the narrative, rather than any pyrotechnics or special effects.”⁴⁴ The playful cross-cuts Dermody writes about paradoxically direct attention to the coincident and arbitrary nature of events in Mike’s life, which are in fact highly ‘choreographed’ by Joe Bogart. This is heightened by the addition of time travel, which further disrupts the naturalism of linear temporal order. *As Time Goes By* shares a thread of futility with the other films mentioned here. Despite Mike’s hero status, the mistakes he makes are able to be undone through the use of time travel, and the paradoxical inescapable destiny to which Joe Bogart has been leading remove Mike from any real agency in the narrative. This film, then, while not as serious in intent and execution as the others mentioned here, is not able to avoid articulating something of the futility of action in the face of a larger power.

The Time Guardian, set in a dystopic and highly militarized fourth millennium, it is the story of a city that is sealed from the outside world, travelling by spinning ‘in’ and ‘out’ of time itself, thus keeping its location hidden from the ‘Jen-Diki’, a race of formerly human cyborgs who seek to take over the city for their own protection. The film makes use of a futuristic mise-en-scene much more generously than other films mentioned here, and this vision of the future is industrial and decidedly unwelcoming. Yet again, however, the clichéd Australian outback town, and its surroundings

⁴³ Susan Dermody, “The Company of Eccentrics,” in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian film in the late ‘80s*, eds. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (North Ryde: AFTRS, 1988), 143.

⁴⁴ Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 171.

provide the setting for a portion of the film, and accordingly, ignorant, unintelligent male characters abound. Elizabeth Jacka suggests that *The Time Guardian* is a film belonging to a group that “effaces its Australian-ness [...] except for [...] a judicious addition of strange exotic Australian landscape and strange exotic Australian Aborigines.”⁴⁵ This is not entirely accurate, as a good portion of the narrative tension in the first half of the film arises specifically out of the conflicts the protagonists have with the rural characters. The ignorant pragmatism of the bush stereotype is, it would seem, unassailable. Even in defeat (one of the policemen is killed by the Jen-Diki), the arrogance and blundering stupidity of the locals is consistently uppermost in narrative focus.

The film articulates concerns over environmental protection and maintenance, and issues of pollution are foregrounded as the battles between the humans and Jen-Diki are fought over the city itself, the only remaining safe haven in a polluted world. The narrative displays a lament for a cleaner world, which is solidified by the association the people from the future have with the Aboriginal characters. From the rock paintings of the city, to the continued references to the ancient nature of the exiled city, and the link to Aboriginals – even to the point where their traditional dances seem to mimic the earlier fight between the humanoid cyborgs and the humans – the narrative ceaselessly deploys a perspective that is highly critical of the present. Indeed the final victory only comes after the hero, Ballard, realizes he must listen to the teachings of his elderly, outcast master. Jacka argues that *The Time Guardian* is guilty

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Jacka, “Critical Positions,” in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian film in the late ‘80s*, eds. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, (North Ryde: AFTRS, 1988), 77.

of using “Aboriginals in an opportunistic way to signify exoticness or magic.”⁴⁶ This is made clear through the use of the Australian Aboriginals as the earthly contact for the time-travelling city, and the film emphasizes the ignorance of contemporary human knowledge, in relation to both ancient and future knowledge (which appear to be in unison with each other).

The Time Guardian, *Incident at Raven’s Gate* and *As Time Goes By* are, in demonstration, very different films, but the common ground they tread is significant. Their status as science fiction is ostensibly secondary to their aspect towards social concerns. *Incident at Raven’s Gate* glosses over infidelity, murder and deceit, while *As Time Goes By* and *The Time Guardian* seem to express considerable distaste for the present in favour of a nostalgic past and future. The dominant social order of the present is subordinate to the needs of the characters, yet the characters display a significant lack of control over their social situation, suggesting that what at first might appear to be indifference to the systems governing social hierarchy is, in fact, more appropriately viewed as impotence in regard to them.

Mad Max and Dark City

Mad Max 2 (Miller, 1982) is set in a future that exists after an oil crisis forces the world into total economic and social breakdown, and subsequent full-scale war. No global or national authority exists, and the landscape is in the hands of complete anarchy. The only power is in violence. Max roams the highways, with his dog, trying to avoid violent gangs. It is a scavenger society, and petrol is the commodity the

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Jacka, “The AFC Genre and Social Realist Film in the 80s,” in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian film in the late ‘80s*, eds. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, (North Ryde: AFTRS, 1988), 95.

entire population of the barren landscape are searching for. After happening upon, and ‘befriending’ a strange gyrocopter pilot, Max discovers a fuel depot which is besieged by a violent gang. The almost complete lawlessness, and the total lack of ‘civilization’ is suggestive, as has been illustrated in relation to the preceding films, of a lack of trust in (or control over) formal systems of social organization.

The group living within the confines of the fuel depot apparently desire peace, and wish to relocate themselves to the coast, which serves as a metaphor for the freedom from the prison that is the desert landscape. Max appears to be the saviour of the situation, after offering to provide a prime mover that will haul the tanker to the coast, beyond the violent gangs, in exchange for some fuel. Upon keeping his side of the bargain, Max declares he will not help the group take their tanker to the coast, but, when he leaves the depot, his attempt to escape the violent gangs fails, and he loses his car and dog, and is badly injured. His failure to escape on his own results in the loss of his car, which signals his loss of freedom and control over his individual destiny,⁴⁷ leaving him only one option, to help Papagallo’s group escape to the coast. The landscape functions through the narrative as the catalyst for the violence, as the coastal escape represents freedom and peace. Delia Falconer argues that this is indicative of a general aspect towards the rural landscape of Australia:

the environmental devastation of the central “wasteland” of Australia is tied to unemployment and an irrational desire for warfare continued from an irrational past, and contrasted to an “authentic” exploitation of the land (mining). The frontier code is reinscribed in the landscape, with the privileged framing of technological control over symbiosis, settlement over nomadism, consensus over chaos, reproductive heterosexuality over “Deviant” sex, “natural” justice

⁴⁷ While the road movie ordinarily equates the vehicle with freedom (as a crucial narrative element), films participating in a range of styles and genres in Australian cinema, directly and indirectly, suggest this relationship. Some examples are *The Cars That Ate Paris* (Weir, 1974), *Freedom* (Hicks, 1982), *The Big Steal* (Tass, 1990), *Metal Skin* (Wright, 1994), *Kiss or Kill* (Bennett, 1997), *Heaven’s Burning* (Lahiff, 1997), and even *Wolf Creek* (McLean, 2005).

over legal rhetoric, and a coastal sensibility opposed to the “emptiness” of the Australian interior.⁴⁸

Max functions within this landscape as part of this ‘frontier code’, embodying seemingly contradictory sides of the oppositions Falconer suggests. He is at once nomadic yet desiring technological control; heterosexual yet chaotic. That his character occupies paradoxical ground in his relationship with the landscape suggests his ambiguous path, and ultimately mirrors his failure to escape (in this instalment of the series) the landscape, while helping others to do so.

Barbour suggests that Max “seeks to break with all traditions of the past, attempting to define his own reality through a solo existence, avoiding all thought or human connections, reducing his existence to nothing more than mere survival.”⁴⁹ This system fails for Max however, as he is unable to maintain his solo existence, despite his desire to do so. Mick Broderick examines the *Mad Max* trilogy as a reformulation of varied conceptions of the myth of the apocalyptic hero/saviour.⁵⁰ Max’s journey from isolation, to the oil-pumping station of Papagallo and his followers, to abandonment on the highway after serving, unknowingly, as a decoy, brings together ideas about determinism, religion, and the role of humans in a world left desolate and devastated by nuclear conflict. Much science fiction cinema since the 1960s has, in keeping with mythical Christian doctrine, presented a world in which the only hope for emancipation comes in the form of an “alien messiah.”⁵¹ Circumstances are rarely within the control of populations that are increasingly geographically fragmented,

⁴⁸ Delia Falconer, “‘We Don’t Need to Know the Way Home’: Selling Australian Space in the Mad Max Trilogy,” *Southern Review* 27, no. 1 (1994), 38.

⁴⁹ Dennis H. Barbour, “Heroism and Redemption in the Mad Max Trilogy,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27, no. 3 (1999): 30.

⁵⁰ Mick Broderick, “Heroic Apocalypse: Mad Max, Mythology and the Millennium,” in *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, ed. Chris Sharrett (Washington DC: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 250-272.

⁵¹ See Hugh Ruppersberg, “The Alien Messiah,” in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990).

politically disempowered and, often, almost totally enslaved to the will of mega-corporate fascist governments. However, during this time an increasing mistrust of technology has developed. As Ruppertsberg points out, the hope for redemption offered by the deity-like technologies of *ET* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* has been balanced by such nightmarish visions as *The Terminator* and *Alien*. Max represents, within this schema, an unwitting saviour. His powers do not exceed those of his foes, and he is rarely, if ever, in control of his situation.

Dark City follows John Murdoch, who is similarly not in control, as he wakes to find himself in an unfamiliar location, apparently unaware of who he is, or how he managed to get there. Murdoch commences a desperate investigation and discovers that he is apparently the subject of an experiment, and he gradually realizes that a race of what appear to be aliens, known as the Strangers, controls the city of perpetual night in which he lives, exerting their power by will alone. They do this, it appears, by stopping time, forcing the humans into unconsciousness as they change the shape and organization of the surroundings. Murdoch learns that he is immune to the powers of the Strangers, that he does not fall asleep as others do, and that he is able to change things - to 'tune' as the aliens do - with the power of his mind. He suffers, however, from almost total amnesia as a result of the failure of the experiment on him, and is alienated from most other characters by both what he knows and what he doesn't know. For the duration of the film, the viewer appears bound to Murdoch's quest, and indeed, "our knowledge is one of confusion, not collusion."⁵² The range and depth of narrative information appears formulated quite strictly to this uncertain end.

⁵² Peter Fitting, "Unmasking the Real? Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, eds. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 159.

Murdoch ultimately overcomes the aliens with the help of a mysterious psychologist who has aided the Strangers in their experiments, yet the resolution falls considerably short of answering many of the quandaries established by the story. With the help of Dr Schreber, Murdoch uses his own powers to defeat the Strangers, to ‘free’ the people of the city from the predicament they did not realize they were in, and finally to create a new city of his own imagining. In overcoming the slavery of the Strangers, however, it becomes clear that the characters cannot overcome the slavery of their own false memories, and as such the film’s closure, like many I have discussed in this dissertation, is one of acquiescence rather than outright victory.

Dark City is a text that is not as demonstrably ‘Australian’ as many of the others mentioned so far.⁵³ The film uses a distinct yet highly varied mix of styles, drawing on noir and sci-fi, which produce what is ultimately a cartoon-like array of settings, props and costumes. Reviewer Dennis Lim, noting the somewhat muddled throwing together of signifiers from many genres, suggests that “Proyas’s achievement here is chiefly aesthetic, and like the plot, the look of the film is less strictly original than it is boldly referential.”⁵⁴ The referentiality Lim puts forward is suggestive of ideas

⁵³ Judging the ‘Australianness’ of a film like this can be a problem for studies of Australian cinema. This film clearly does not visually or narratively mobilize concerns that can easily or obviously be identified as uniquely Australian. O’Regan and Venkatasawmy suggest that:

...debating the ‘Americanness’ or ‘Australianness’ of this film is futile. Its apparent cultural non-specificity from a strictly Australianist perspective is matched by its rich cultural specificity and anchorage in previous stories and images drawn from a broader Western (and Eastern) modernist vocabulary of the metropolis.

This is a film that does not take part in a specifically Australian set of representational strategies, yet refers to signs and meanings that are part of an Australian cultural vocabulary, even if that vocabulary relates largely to a visual style that is not specifically national. Indeed, there is little visual information in the comic book style of the film, leaning heavily on 1940s and 1950s motifs, that suggests anything particularly or uniquely Australian. However, as I have established earlier in this chapter, and in preceding sections of this work, films exist not solely as creative texts, but as part of an industrial and cultural network of texts and processes. *Dark City* is routinely included in the academic and industrial discourses of Australian cinema, and therefore warrants inclusion here. Passage taken from Tom O’Regan and Rama Venkatasawmy, “Only one day at the beach: *Dark City* and Australian film-making,” *Metro* 117 (1998), 19.

⁵⁴ Dennis Lim, “Night on Earth,” *The Village Voice*, Mar 3, 1998, 43.

concerning simulation, representation and reality that are particularly relevant to the vocabulary of postmodernism, and operate in *Dark City* for viewer and character alike, at the visual level in the stylized mise-en-scene, and less obviously in the emphasized link between objects and identity. *Dark City* is very much focussed on concerns of simulation and reality, and of the instability of such designations. As the plot progresses, Murdoch uncovers clues as to the falsity of his surroundings. Gadgets that look almost archaic appear to perform the most complex of tasks, and marvellous technology hides under the skin of retrograde machines in an illogical pastiche of highly stylized physical elements. The link between memories, belongings and identity is reinforced by the Strangers, drawing attention to the unease over concerns about constructedness and artificiality. During a confrontation between Murdoch and a Stranger who is chasing him, it is revealed by the Stranger that the city is in fact constructed entirely from a collection of memories, that have been recycled and redistributed among the population countless times during the 'tuning' experiments.

The notion that humans are the sum of their memories poses the further question of what exactly differentiates the humans from the Strangers, and indeed each other. After Murdoch's manufactured memories are implanted into an alien, in order to aid his pursuit of the protagonist, the alien begins to exhibit strangely compulsive and self-indulgent behaviour. His erratic and emotional behaviour differentiates him from the aliens, and aligns him more closely with Murdoch, as he seems to become more 'human'. The distance between self and other here has been effectively eroded completely, yet Murdoch and the Stranger still act quite differently, suggesting that there is something more than memory behind the formation of identity, a notion supported in the romantic conclusion to the film.

The characters' situation in a purely simulated world is confused by the incursion of disruptions to time, during the nightly 'tuning' sequences performed by the Strangers. For Charles Tryon, this has the effect of highlighting the constructedness of the film, and in conjunction, the apparent constructedness of humans. He states that:

Dark City's focus on the challenges to both the mechanical reproduction of the image and the stable definition of the human are tied into the film's treatment of cinematic movement, specifically the disruption of mechanical and human movement during the tuning sequences.⁵⁵

Tryon highlights a mistrust of digital technologies that is played out by an equivalent mistrust of the result of those digital technologies within the narrative confines of *Dark City*. His argument suggests that *Dark City* represents a shared suspicion of digital technologies, as the unreliability of the digital image as a source of authority (as opposed to the presumed reliability of the photochemical image) is akin to the unreliability of the physical environment of the city. The viewer, being subjected to digital special effects during the tuning sequences, is placed even further into the position of mistrust owing to the obvious falsity of not only the setting, but of the film itself as a fictional text.

Tryon associates 'digitization' with the process of tuning performed by the Strangers, an analogous link that he extends to the mechanisms of digital special effects. He relates digitization to temporal breakdowns in films, and the shifting nature, or false constructedness of human habitats and experience, claiming that "digital technologies both produce unstable identities and place them in a "world of appearances" where reality proves to be just another illusion."⁵⁶ I would argue that Tryon leans perhaps a

⁵⁵ Charles Tryon, "Virtual Cities and Stolen Memories: Temporality and the Digital in *Dark City*," *Film Criticism* 28 no. 2 (2003), 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

little too heavily on the link between the viewers' experience of the special effects, and the implications of the narrative related to the result of those special effects, that being the 'tuning', but generally Tryon's argument is analogous to the general feeling of instability engendered by the narrative. This instability is implied by the notion that uncovering layers of 'unreality' is simply moving to a different level of 'the game' and that there remains a sense of still being 'in the game'. This premise has sustained a number of science fiction films, notably David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999). This confusion between the boundaries of reality and fiction, like many of the horror films mentioned in Chapter Four, is apparent in *Dark City* as the distinction between viewer and character is clouded. John Murdoch is at once an inhabitant of the city, and the story, yet simultaneously an outsider, an observer who is witnessing the machinations of the changing city, and as such his position is aligned more closely with that of the viewer than that of other characters.

In *Dark City*, the gap between signifier and signified, on the personal level of the characters, is crucial. They cling to emotions and meanings associated with signified events and locations by interacting with a series of endlessly changing signifiers. The signified is memory, and the signifiers are artifacts produced by the Strangers. The memories are first implanted, and then the physical surroundings of the people are modified in order to hail those false memories. The potentially fictive nature of the signifier/signified relationship is emphasized by the consistent questioning of memory and artifacts as authentic sources of knowledge throughout the film.⁵⁷ The memories, like the changing buildings, are part of a system of signs that floats endlessly, "trapped in a perpetual present," not able to be anchored in any past, and accordingly,

⁵⁷ Tryon, 53.

the inhabitants of the city, “wander aimlessly [...] without any clear memories and without a sense of location or direction.”⁵⁸ John Murdoch is not free from this trapped state, “he is operational as a man with no memory, no name, no past, only a present constantly being remade before his eyes and a past which can be anything at all.”⁵⁹ The city is inescapable, and the allusion to the circular nature of things, both through narrative and stylistic devices, suggests a futility of action that is all encompassing. Murdoch encounters men who are apparently mad, driven so by an apparent ability to see the infinite recurrence, and the inescapability of their situation.

Peter Fitting concludes that ultimately, *Dark City* can have no literal interpretation, and thus suggests that it serves to illustrate metaphorically “the confusion and helplessness of people frustrated and discouraged with the political system today.”⁶⁰ I would suggest, like Fitting, that the film operates more powerfully on a less immediately accessible level of interpretation. Within the narrative, the nature of reality itself is forced into question in a bipartite process of physical and mental simulation by the Strangers. While the Strangers seek answers as to what it might mean to be human, the viewer seeks answers to the question: what makes reality real? John Murdoch’s emancipation is more an acquiescence to his implanted memories, a surrender to the futility of escaping the constructedness of everyday life, than an escape from the Strangers’ experiments, as he decides to formulate the world around him according to who he thinks he should be, in the absence of any idea of who he actually is. The emphasis on the constructed nature of reality, of no solid base on which to formulate a personal identity, is, in the case of *Dark City*, presented as both compelling and philosophically important.

⁵⁸ Tryon, 50.

⁵⁹ O’Regan and Venkatasawmy, 23.

⁶⁰ Fitting, 160.

Futile Fictions

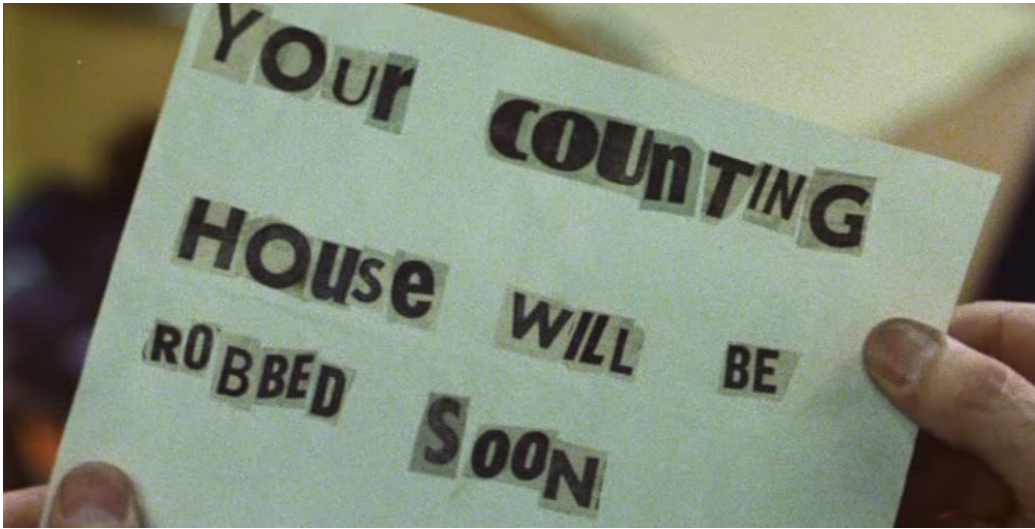
The varied narratives and thematic concerns and consequent analysis I have offered here point squarely, I would argue, at one particularly strong undercurrent in science fiction, and that is the pervasive sense of social futility. Less clear, but nonetheless identifiable, is a thread of moral uncertainty - an inability to commit to any particular set of moral codes as the 'correct' choice - and this notion of moral uncertainty or ambivalence will be carried on immediately in Chapter Six. Returning to futility, in ending this chapter I should contextualize the chapter title. The famous quote from the Borg collective, uttered before 'assimilating' their prey, is strangely ironic in the context of Australian science fiction. Resistance indeed proves very futile for the heroes of Star Trek in their battles with the Borg, yet in Australian narratives, a much more frightening and powerful sense of futility encompasses a wide range of texts, and it is almost exclusively all-powerful. The thread of commonality results from the relationship constructed between characters and their situations, in terms of their ability to express free will, and act accordingly – to affect their surroundings meaningfully. It is normally the inability to do this that instructs much of the narrative arc. The films share the unique quality of initially appearing to be quite light-hearted, yet there is an identifiable melancholy, or perhaps more accurately, an undercurrent of seriousness of theme that is present beneath the quite 'shiny' 1980s exterior of the first few films covered here. The alarming aspect of representations of the outback communities in the films covered in this chapter is that the alien presence is generally the option the characters choose to identify with, rather than the rural Australian. As Brian McFarlane has suggested, this can be partially attributed to a general tendency in Australia cinema to represent rural areas condescendingly, or at the very least, in a

manner that fails to afford characters in rural areas any real agency in narratives.⁶¹ In these films, the fantastic relates to a disbelief in the rural social system as a total unknown as much as to any alien or futuristic presence, and this unknown is explored vigorously. It has been argued that “[t]ypical of the heroes of these movies, they overcome some especially horrible excrescence of their society without even trying to deal with the fundamental evil, which remains omnipotent and unassailable.”⁶² In the case of these Australian science fiction films this unassailable evil, it would seem, is the position of the individual in the social hierarchy. Science fiction, then, is distinctly a social form. This is exemplified in the texts analysed here, in that while being somewhat disparate, and perhaps arbitrary, they nonetheless share an attempt to unhinge the formal foundation of our expectations of social organization. Early in the chapter I discussed Barry K. Grant’s assertion that science fiction is exemplified by an attempt to look ‘up and out’ for explanatory mechanisms, yet in Australian incarnations, this outward perspective reveals futility and hopelessness, as individual agency is rendered insignificant within the narrative.

⁶¹ Brian McFarlane, “Country Towns in Australian Films: Trap or Comfort Zone?” *Metro* 146/147 (2005), 46-52.

⁶² H. Bruce Franklin, “Visions of the Future in Science Fiction Films from 1970 to 1982,” in “Cultural Theory and Science Fiction Cinema”, in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 29.

Chapter Six - Criminal, Outlaw, Larrikin



Money Movers (Bruce Beresford, 1978)

Essentially, we are asked to suspend conventional moral criteria for human behaviour and to align our sympathies with characters who are more or less likeable but just happen to be interested in pursuing unlawful activities, notably theft, and sometimes a bit of good-natured murder.¹

Popular culture is undoubtedly obsessed with crime, and particularly violent crime.²

Crime appears in cinema as a representation of a range of complex social and philosophical questions surrounding the transgression of laws and regulations, and the transgression of social mores. It would therefore be remiss to investigate undercurrents in Australian cinema without directing some attention to the most visible aspects of violence, social breakdown, psychological disturbance and malevolent behaviour in Australian cinema, in the form of crime. In many cinematic cases, the actual laws governing a situation are rendered subordinate within the narrative chain to some overpowering personal or moral dilemma, and therefore films dealing with crime generally present, as a corollary to the main plot line, a challenging aspect to the perceived appropriateness, and potency, of legal administration.

The films gathered here are not so much films of a genre, as, rather, films demonstrative of a particular narrative aspect towards crime, as a social, cultural, and personal quandary. The title of 'crime' in relation to cinema would more ordinarily be associated with detective fiction, indeed the crime film has been primarily concerned with the process of uncovering the truth behind (usually) a theft or murder.³ However,

¹ Brian McFarlane, "Dirty Deeds and Good Clean Fun: Some Recent Australian Caper Movies," *Metro* 140 (2004): 140.

² Richard Osborne, "Crime and the Media: From Media Studies to Post-modernism," in *Crime and the Media: The Post-Modern Spectacle*, eds. David Kidd-Hewitt and Richard Osborne (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 29.

³ Introduction to *The BFI Companion to Crime*, ed. Phil Hardy (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 11.

I have used the word here in order to designate cinema that, quite simply, situates criminal activity as the central narrative concern, and accordingly, investigates the human responses to such activity. The label of detective fiction potentially implies a set of narrative conventions and stylistic choices that are not necessarily as important to this chapter as the crime itself, and the consequent human actions. In Australian literary incarnations of the crime story since the 1950s, Stephen Knight notes a departure from the narrative tendencies of detective fiction, as the stories, broadly speaking, “employ no central detective at all and events themselves would throw up the criminal.”⁴ This observation is important to the analysis of contemporary Australian cinema involving crime, because, as will be demonstrated, these texts generally demonstrate the same reluctance to afford a singular investigative character the ‘power’ to deduce the legal and moral conclusion to a narrative path.

The films I examine in relation to crime cover disparate subject matter, are diverse in style and execution, and would be considered part of the same genre only very loosely. The spread of texts is as varied as those covered in Chapter Five, however, the lack of any particularly solid, identifiable uniformity in the preceding chapter was largely attributable to the relative immaturity of science fiction cinema in Australia. The same cannot be said for films concerning crime. Australian cinema has long preoccupied itself with narratives that explore crime and the criminal life. The reason for exploring what might at first seem an arbitrary and indeed messy selection of films is, in part, to illustrate the overall position that I am developing. The undercurrents identified throughout this dissertation are independent of the machinations of genre. The position of indifference towards conventional moral judgments of crime that I

⁴ Stephen Knight, “The Vanishing Policeman: Patterns of Control in Australian Crime Fiction,” in *Australian Popular Culture*, eds. Ian Craven, Martin Gray and Geraldine Stoneham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 114.

will examine can be identified in texts that cut across genres and styles. The intention of this chapter is not the identification of an undercurrent of uncertainty and ambiguity in the social reactions to crime solely within crime cinema, but rather the discovery of an undercurrent of this order of social uncertainty cutting across the representation of crime in a far broader range of texts.

This chapter covers slightly less theoretical ground than those preceding it, instead placing a greater emphasis on discussing a wider selection of films, as is appropriate given the greater number of films that are relevant to this section. Furthermore, sections of theory from the preceding chapters resonate throughout the films encountered here. In particular I am referring here to the notions of transgression of, and alienation from, systems of social organization. In this chapter I commence by examining important ideas about the character of the criminal in narrative fiction. I then move on to identify some pertinent aspects of the relationship between crime and authority, through the context of Australia as an English penal colony, after which I move through ideas concerning narrative devices of ambivalence and suspense, and how they function in the crime film. The chapter then develops a series of textual analyses. Overall, the chapter establishes a strong connection between many Australian films that is based on ambivalence towards a socially constructed moral perspective towards criminal activity, in favour of a relative, situationally-based appraisal of moral concerns. Essentially, through narratives in which a criminal activity is centralized, Australian cinema generates an undercurrent of wariness and scepticism about socially defined, culturally enforced legal administration.

The Criminal Character

Crime in Australian cinema has existed on a continuum that might be simply described as ranging from playful to psychopathic. *The Boys*, discussed in Chapter Three, is a frightening counter-weight to the largely light-hearted take on criminal activity found in films like *Getting' Square* (Nyst, 2003), *The Hard Word* (Roberts, 2002) and *Dirty Deeds* (Caesar, 2002).⁵ The latter films certainly imply some serious questions about the association of larrikinism with crime, but in execution they demonstrate a very different kind of criminal character. The narratives invite a chuckle from the viewer, as the buffoonery of some of the criminal activities, coupled with the offhanded manner in which the boss, in both instances, discusses serious crimes while interacting with his family, adds up to an entirely different tone and disposition. I would argue that the viewer is never tempted into the same kind of identification with David Wenham's Brett Sprague as they are with Bryan Brown's Barry, or even Pando, in *Two Hands* (Jordan, 1999). However, this observation is not intended to underplay the significance of the moral and social concerns articulated by those films that exist closer to the playful end of this criminal continuum. *Two Hands* and *Dirty Deeds*, for example, mobilize what I would suggest is a serious moral dilemma. The young, reluctant protagonist, in both cases, attempts to remove himself from the criminal life, through romance and an escape to a different location and lifestyle, and this seems to absolve the criminal activity from any kind of social repercussion. The suggestion, it would seem, is that the involvement in criminal activity was nothing more than a rite-of-passage, or an adolescent phase, both trivial and forgivable. I will examine this in more detail further into this chapter, but for now

⁵ Brian McFarlane argues that *Dirty Deeds* is a failed caper film, in the sense that it depicts quite serious and violent crimes, such that the light-hearted tone is undermined by the excessive visual violence. However, I would argue that it depicts a very different criminal trajectory, which is the distinction I am drawing here, and as such is effective as a contrasting texts. In McFarlane, 48-52.

it is sufficient to identify this spectrum of criminal representations, and to emphasize the importance of films that can be positioned anywhere thereon. Essentially, the criminal character occupying the playful end of this continuum is an articulation of a long and involved history of larrikinism, of the glorification of the outlaw status, and of a sense of justice in an anti-authoritarian position, which are, of course, all things that need some examination and contextualization.

In the history of fiction dealing with Australia's colonial status, and indeed in much Australian fiction more widely, there has been a consistent thread of a character disposition that is highly resistant to the authority of the English. It has been argued that the very roots of the myth of the bushman, discussed in Chapter Two, are located in attempts to differentiate, physiologically and socially, the Australian man from the Englishman (of course, within this schema the woman is inconsequential, although the stoic resilience of women in fictions like *The Drover's Wife* are eagerly appropriated by the male discourse as indicative of the success of the Australian type). Australia's status as a penal colony, subsequent to English settlement, culturally reinforces an Anti-English sentiment in cultural artifacts, particularly in films. This sentiment comes in the form of poking fun at characters such as Hugh Grant's bumbling Englishman in *Sirens* (Duigan, 1984), demonstrating outright violent rebellion, like that in *The Proposition* (Hillcoat, 2005), and attempting to make a more pointed, if nostalgic and sentimental criticism, as is evident in *Gallipoli* (Weir, 1981). Much of the anti-authoritarian behaviour of characters can be seen as part of a chain of textual incarnations of a resistant character disposition towards the ruling class,

operating within the context of Australia as an English colony.⁶ Of course authority figures are not always rendered as English, and the Anglo-Australian tension is not the sole province of resistance in this country, however, I want to suggest here that comprehensive articulations of a cultural resentment of primarily English authority forms part of the basis on which characters operating ‘outside’ the law are constructed and portrayed in contemporary Australian cinema. This resentment is represented in oppositions not just between England and Australia, but between upper and lower classes within Australia.

Crime and Authority – Bandits and Outlaws

The resistance to authority, whether the authority of the English, or of upper and ruling classes more generally, appears linked very much to an idea of persecution, and it is an idea which resonates strongly among representations of the poor, or the ‘underclass’ across geographical borders. Explaining social trends evident in British gangster and crime films, Claire Monk writes that there appears in film a disillusioned relativism towards moral questions of crime. She writes:

The social factor that had the most visible impact on 1990s British cinema’s treatment of crime was the increased complexity of public attitudes to crime. [...] In 1990s Britain, the boundaries between underworld and underclass, petty and organised crime and criminality and mainstream society came to seem increasingly blurred.⁷

I want to suggest here that the conflation of criminal activity and this underclass Monk writes about has links with Hobsbawm’s examination of the myths of banditry, in which he suggests that “[b]andits belong to peasantry,” and that, stripped of its

⁶ Graeme Turner notes this trend in Australian fictions, and refers to it as ‘convictism’, a perspective based on “the myth of the convict as the innocent victim – brutalised by the system and thus the source of our anti-authoritarian and democratic heritage.” In *National Fictions: Literature, film and the construction of Australian narrative*, 2nd ed. (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 60-62.

⁷ Claire Monk, “From Underworld to Underclass: Crime and British Cinema in the 1990s,” in *British Crime Cinema*, eds. Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (London: Routledge, 1999), 175.

historical and social specificity, the bandit myth emphasizes “the fellowship of free and equal men, the invulnerability to authority, and the championship of the weak, oppressed and cheated.”⁸ The myth of the bandit, when articulated in film through the association of the criminal class with the poor, leads to a situation in which conventional moral standards give way under the weight of social oppression. Graham Seal argues that “[t]he outlaw hero of tradition is almost invariably an ordinary man driven to violence by the injustice he and his supporters have suffered.”⁹ I would argue that the ‘ordinary man’ Seal writes about here is closely aligned with the peasantry and underclasses of Hobsbawm and Monk. The most crucial idea here, from which the moral pendulum swings, is in the definition of ‘injustice’, and is expressed from the perspective and experiences of the underclasses. The ‘ordinary’ man, it would seem, has little choice but to rise up against his oppressors, at least in the textual representations of such, which I want to suggest are founded quite firmly in the traditions of the outlaw/bandit myth that both Hobsbawm and Seal discuss. Further to this, the notion of injustice has little to do, it would seem, with the conventions of legal and moral administration of the society within which the bandit/criminal operates, at least from a narrative perspective.

Hobsbawm sees the mythical bandit as clearly indicative of the link between the poor and crime. He writes that bandits “are a part of history which is not so much a record of events and those who shaped them, as of the symbols of the theoretically controllable but actually uncontrolled factors which determine the world of the poor.”¹⁰ The ideas of uncontrolled factors having a determining influence on the poor

⁸ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Ebenezer Baylis & Son, 1969), 111, 113.

⁹ Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 192.

¹⁰ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Ebenezer Baylis & Son, 1969), 115.

are echoed in a more contemporary context by Wendy Kaminer, in her appraisal of links between violence and culture in the United States. She observes that:

American culture in 1990 seemed poised to embrace revenge because it had already embraced victimhood. The pervasive sense of victimhood, which has been the subject of so much debate, is, after all, a sense of aggrievement. For many people who feel that they've been wronged by their families or society, vindictiveness as well as extreme sensitivity to slights may readily become personality traits.¹¹

There is an intersection of ideas here pertaining to social status, notions of justice, and the disposition of violent behaviour. It would seem that a link exists between a cultural tendency towards feelings of victimhood, and the way narratives question moral and legal conventions through outlaw and bandit myths. I have no intention here of attempting to uncover sociological or psychological explanations for violence in contemporary culture, and without wanting to dwell on the point unduly, I do, however, want to suggest here that contemporary cinema in Australia has, in part, inherited from America a love of violence, and in particular, violence at the end of a gun barrel. Gregory Shafer writes "[i]t is difficult [...] to underestimate the way Hollywood has historically distorted the image of guns and their place in U.S. pop culture."¹² Shafer is particularly critical of the tradition of the cowboy film, which largely depicts the gun-toting hero as both narrative saviour and moral compass, a parallel to, I want to suggest, our own depictions of the Australian bushmen and bushrangers.

Shafer links the fantasy of the gun as an instrument of justice and redemption to a widespread sense of helplessness among American citizens. There is a sense (which Shafer alludes to) that film viewers are able to throw off the shackles of a

¹¹ Wendy Kaminer, *It's All The Rage* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 59.

¹² Gregory Shafer, "Cinema and the American Malaise," *The Humanist* 64, no. 4 (2001), 31.

disappointing reality, and temporarily stop paying heed to the rules and regulations of a government, or ruling class, by directing their anger towards the antagonists in crime and other violent narratives, yet paradoxically, this diffusion of anger ultimately results in the sustained presence of a political status-quo, as the bureaucratic juggernaut of an unfair government is absolved of any blame for social ills.¹³ Shafer is of course speaking in the context of the United States, but this idea is no less relevant in Australia. However, the texts mentioned here instil an ambiguity or ambivalence, as one is not always certain at whom to direct this apparently misplaced anger, particularly as the line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ guys, so to speak, is dirtied by systems of social organization within which delimiting moral categories becomes relative rather than absolute.

In order to understand the relevance of the way such myths and historical ideas as have been established here function in relation to present social circumstances, Graham Seal has noted, in his work on folklore surrounding outlaw legends, that “a tradition is essentially a device for linking the past with the present.”¹⁴ He goes on to write that:

[i]t does not matter whether folklore presents an accurate picture of the past, if indeed such a thing is even possible. What matters is the manner in which the past is re-worked and re-presented through folklore and the way in which that representation can affect the attitudes of men and women in the present.¹⁵

The actual historical ‘truth’ of any particular piece of folklore or myth is not as important as the way the folklore functions in contemporary incarnation. Folklore is perpetuated not through historical factuality or consistency, but through continued deployment in the cultural milieu. In *Idiot Box*, for example, it might be argued that

¹³ Gregory Shafer, “Cinema and the American Malaise,” *The Humanist* 64, no. 4 (2001), 33.

¹⁴ Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the two young men, Mick and Kev, are a modern day representation of the convict settlers, trapped in a suburban prison, their desires governed by the aspirations of a wealthy and faceless elite class, to which they have no access. Their only recourse is violence and crime, as it is the major separating factor between themselves and those who, apparently, keep them downtrodden. Linking with Kaminer's ideas of victimhood and Monk's blurring of the distinctions between criminals and the social underclass, Seal writes that "[i]n the case of the cultural tradition of the outlaw, the perceived past has continually made possible communally sanctioned acts of law-breaking and violence."¹⁶ Thus the actions of Mick and Kev can be sanitized to a degree, through the power of an outlaw myth, and in this process the ambivalence towards conventional moral decisions is harboured. *Idiot Box* warrants a mention here, in relation to the restatement of myth, because of its interaction with ideas of masculinity, and the way in which masculinity is tied into violence and crime, and further to this, the way the narrative, temporarily at least, condones and even applauds the actions of the derelict male characters and their totally indifferent perspective on any moral or social considerations about their actions. *Idiot Box* presents Mick and Kev's criminal activity as an almost natural response to their social alienation.

Phil Butterss (quoted by Rebecca Johinke) writes:

In spite of Kev's appalling treatment of his girlfriend, and his potential for violence, he remains likeable, to a degree, through his sense of humour, and through sympathy on the audience's part for the hopelessness of his situation.¹⁷

They even pay lip service to Ned Kelly, in an attempt to somehow justify or dilute or purify their violence and criminal behaviour through the filter of a myth wound up tightly with the representation of the larrikin Australian masculinity.

¹⁶ Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182.

¹⁷ Rebecca Johinke. "Idiot Box: Mick Cameron as Yobbo Flâneur," *Journal of Australian Studies* 78 (2003), 148.

Ambivalence, Suspense and Moral Alternatives in Australian cinema

While noting that “consistently sustained ambivalence” toward a moral predicament in a film is usually rare, Martin Rubin writes that: “More common are individual suspense sequences in which two morally opposed alternatives are clamouring for our allegiance at the same time.”¹⁸ He goes on to explain this suspense in more detail:

Suspense centrally involves the idea of suspension. We are suspended between question and answer, between anticipation and resolution, between alternative answers to the question posed, and sometimes between ambivalent emotions and sympathies that are aroused by a suspenseful situation.¹⁹

This questioning ambivalence towards a particular situation is a sustained presence in many Australian films involving a criminal action. Expressing this as a kind of suspension between explanations, an inability to situate stable categories on which to base any judgment, endows the idea with a distinctly uncanny or fantastic flavour. These ideas have resurfaced consistently throughout this dissertation as elements of narrative construction that inspire, in both character and viewer, a feeling of uncertainty and hesitation. Moreover, this suspension implies a duality to characters and their actions. The central gangster in *Dirty Deeds*, Barry, is simultaneously a cruel, murderous criminal, and a reasonably charming family man. This character creates the kind of suspension to which Martin gestures. Brett Sprague’s return from jail in *The Boys* offers up the same order of suspension, albeit with a distinctly different tone. The relationship between Brett and his brothers develops the tension between anticipation and resolution, and between ambivalent emotions and sympathies in precisely the way Rubin suggests. *The Boys* generates moments of

¹⁸ Martin Rubin, *Thrillers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

sympathy for Brett's brothers, and simultaneously develops an intriguing narrative perspective towards Sandra Sprague, Brett's mother. Her position as both partially supportive of her sons, and yet frightened and disgusted by them is representative of the complicated moral terrain she negotiates, and accordingly, her character demonstrates the series of suspensions Rubin suggests are crucial to the instability, however temporary, of clear moral distinctions.

Other distinctions in films involving crime are, however, drawn more clearly. In *Dirty Deeds*, for example, the Vietnam War is positioned as the primary social (and moral) backdrop, in the midst of which the criminal story is revealed. The crucial opposition, particularly in light of the tension surrounding Vietnam war, arrives as Tony, the visiting mafia representative, tells Barry, the local criminal boss (in relation to the new gambling business the Americans are attempting to establish), "we're gonna own it, it'd be un-American if we didn't." This polarizes the two characters, and contextualizes their relationship within the narrative path. Until this point there are uncertainties regarding motivations and allegiances displayed by characters, but as soon as this American ambition encroaches onto the Australian social realm, a line is drawn, over which the characters cannot cross without retribution. The narratives I will mention here seem quite able to establish clear distinctions between some categories – certainly the distinction between Australian and non-Australian is made prominent – yet judgments of value concerning criminal behaviour are habitually and routinely avoided, as the outlaw status of protagonists, a crucial component to certain myths of Australian identity, serves to remove culpability for the repercussions of varying criminal actions.

The undercurrents in Australian narratives concerning crime quickly become clear when looking at a selection of these films. The moral situation constructed by *Shame* (Jodrell, 1987) does not place the viewer in an ambivalent position, but rather points an accusatory finger at such ambivalence through emphasising the community's duplicity in the systematic rape of young women in the town. Despite the clear distinctions being made on the surface of this film, the representation of rape and assault against women, as amounting to not much more than teenage tomfoolery, is indicative of the tendency of Australian films to represent crime as forgivable and trivial, particularly when committed by males. This is not to say that Australian cinema condones this kind of crime, and indeed the film rectifies this situation at the conclusion of the narrative, but the insinuation remains clear. A consistent presence in narratives dealing with crime in Australia is a sense of justification, that criminal activity is tacitly condoned by the characters, and even applauded in certain situations. In the case of *Shame* this criminal behaviour is presented as a scathing criticism, but a less directed approach is often adopted. A more generic and perhaps less socially poignant example comes in the form of *Money Movers* (Beresford, 1978). This film concerns the inside robbery of armoured vans, and Rubin's suggestions concerning suspension are echoed throughout the plot. Brian and Eric Jackson are brothers who work for Darcy's, a large security firm. Competing groups are trying to instigate the robbery of twenty million dollars, while some of the staff are simultaneously working towards tightening security within the company. The plot emphasizes the selection and investigation of staff for the company, and the varying levels of mistrust between the hierarchies of command within the bureaucracy. Tensions and oppositions between groups of characters are clearly established, with the unionized workers appearing directly antagonistic towards the business practices of the management.

The film relies, to an extent, on notions of the underclass and the outlaw myths mentioned above in successfully generating this position. Ultimately the robbery is not successful, and Eric Jackson implicates his criminal 'employer' in the robbery by leaving a note in his pocket, which is recovered after he is killed. Interestingly, while the narrative attempts to elicit sympathy towards the Jackson brothers, conventional moral standards are upheld in the resolution, as the robbery is foiled, and the brothers and their accomplices are killed. However, leading up to the climax the film does not posit any moral disposition as inherently more valid than any other, creating precisely the suspension Rubin discusses. Tellingly, the criminal boss, Henderson, is relatively unscathed by the botched robbery, and those who are actually doing the 'work' are punished with death. This final opposition, between white and blue collar criminal, remains firmly intact.

In contrast, *End Play* (Burstall, 1975) constructs an ambiguous resolution that avoids any overt statement of a moral position, conventional or otherwise. It is again the story of two brothers. Robert (who is adopted) is a disabled ex-professional archer, and Mark is a sailor, and they share an inheritance. There is considerable tension between the brothers, and the narrative implies - through a scene early on in which Robert is practicing his archery, and comes close to hitting Mark with an arrow, presumably deliberately - that despite the congeniality on the surface of their interaction, there is a deep rivalry. Their early exchanges are confusing, as each seems reluctant to speak openly, and the tone shifts from friendliness to hostility quickly and almost randomly. Robert's reluctance to allow his brother to help him with tasks, and Mark's reserved manner in providing personal information demonstrate that the lack

of trust between the brothers is a major factor in their relationship, despite being hidden by each of them behind smart quips and well-placed smirks.

Mark, it seems, is a murderer, responsible for the death of several hitch-hikers while on shore-leave, and the narrative commences by tracing his attempts to dispose of a girl's body, and the subsequent police investigation. The situation is confused and convoluted, as Mark's apparent crimes are gradually and systematically revealed by both the police, and by Robert. The narrative twists as Robert is ultimately revealed as the murderer, motivated primarily by his hatred for his promiscuous mother, and to a lesser extent by a distrust of the police. Mark's involvement in the disposal of the body is an attempt to implicate his brother, and it is gradually revealed that both brothers have, in fact, been attempting to implicate each other to the police. Robert's infirmity does not generate any sense of sympathy for him, and his sharp wit and cleverly articulate manner reveal (and conceal) just enough information for the Police to have them suspect Mark, but not enough for them to prove anything. His deceit is very carefully orchestrated, and the story climaxes, after a long and violent fight between the brothers, with Robert's suicide, freeing him from his terminal illness, and from recrimination for the murders he has committed. Oddly, the police refuse to charge Mark as an accessory, and he is thus left free to pursue a romantic interest, from which his brother was apparently holding him back. This final narrative turn is peculiar, in that there is apparently no motivation behind this act of generosity by the police, other than the whim of the senior detective. The detective has discounted Mark's actions as basically trivial, in the face of apparently bigger concerns, adding more weight to the tendency towards contextual moral judgments that crime is subjected to in Australian cinema.

An equal measure of uncertainty is invested in the narrative of *Harlequin* (Wincer, 1980), which is an unusual but effective mix of thriller and Gothic sensibilities. The young son of a Senator is apparently cured of a terminal cancer by a mysterious faith-healer, who subsequently becomes involved in an affair with the Senator's wife. The relationship of the healer to the Senator's family jeopardizes his political aspirations, and the main criminal action comes as the group of men who are manipulating the political situation have Gregory, the magician-like healer, murdered. This narrative, unlike the others, does not place this crime centrally in the narrative, but rather suggests that political manipulation and crime amount to much the same thing. Rayner suggests that, drawing on aspects of the story of Rasputin, *Harlequin* is a "critique of malign and secretive authority."²⁰ He positions this film under the rubric of Australian Gothic, but I mention it here in relation to crime in order to highlight the links the film suggests between political trickery and magical trickery. The narrative generates discomfort in the tension between political intrigue and the magical Harlequin character,²¹ and this emphasizes the 'illusion' of political practice, as Senator Rast is torn between believing the words of a magician, or the words of his political colleagues.

The mix of American, Australian and English characters occupying roles of political and social importance obscures any specific information about the setting. Given that this is a film in which the setting is primarily the domestic realm, concerning the lives of a Senator, his wife and their child, there is a notable absence of any particular or

²⁰ Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 48.

²¹ Scott Murray, "Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s," in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 97.

recognizable national political (or social) system, and explicit mention of Australia is not made, nor of any other country. The characters in control are American, while the mysterious Gregory appears to be English, and the family at the centre of the plot are, it would seem, Australian.²² This lack of geographic specificity works against any coherent national identity being present in the narrative, and instead suggests the universality of moral bankruptcy within political manoeuvrings. The resolution comes in the form of the complete breakdown of Senator Rast's career, and the suggestion that some of Gregory's magical powers may in fact have been passed on to the young boy. Again, no clear moral lines are drawn. The doubt over Gregory's real identity is not totally removed, and rather than adopting a sympathetic position to one side or the other, the narrative suggests that no system of authority is to be believed without question. The actions of those men influencing the political situation are presented as criminal and unjust, yet they remain untouched by the film's closure, and Senator Rast, for whom the situation has generated the most devastating results, is effectively the victim. As with some of the films mentioned in the previous chapter, including *One Night Stand* and *Incident at Raven's Gate*, the story here reveals a situation in which individuals have suffered, yet the overarching systems and social power structures remain intact.

Concentrating far more closely on concerns between characters, rather than emphasizing overtly outward-looking thematic material, *Dangerous Game* (Hopkins, 1987) is based on the fairly tame premise (and fantasy) of a group of young people trapped in a department store overnight, yet it is a surprisingly sophisticated film (in

²² Rayner explains this lack of geographic specificity as a result of producer Antony Ginnane's deliberate attempt to attract commercial success. Rayner, 48.

terms of cinematography, at least).²³ It moves swiftly through its exposition, revealing the character of Murphy; a crazed policeman bent on exacting revenge on a university student, Jack, for the way he was treated by Jack's now dead father, also a policeman. During this portion of the film, *Dangerous Game* appears to trace a distinct line between the 'good' and 'bad' characters. Murphy is clearly psychotic, and is the aggressor, while Jack and his friends are innocent victims of harassment. Yet even this distinction is subject to some questions, as one of the group, David, uses his computer skills to adjust university results from a computer, and then to gain entry to the department store illegally. These actions however are forgiven and contextualized by the appearance of the consistent thread of the triviality of petty crimes, particularly in relationships between individuals and large institutions that runs through all the films I have mentioned here. The same forgiveness, however, is not afforded to Murphy. He contextualizes his own struggle, and status as a 'battler', when he tells the group that "life's just a game: survival of the richest," yet the narrative opportunity to sympathize with Murphy never really arrives. Initially his actions are no more serious than those of the other characters, but his position as a police officer, and as an Irish immigrant, do not allow him access to the 'underdog' status that so effectively cleanses the misdeeds of the majority of characters throughout these films. The film establishes oppositions between individuals and institutions (like the police and the university), and challenges these oppositions by transgressing social codes, yet the function of those institutions remains unchallenged.

²³ *Dangerous Game* is praised for its achievements as an effective thriller, making it a standout text in the apparently disappointing cinema fare offered by other films at the time. It is a generic text that reached production values that were the aim of the 10BA scheme, but were rarely reached. See Scott Murray, 101, and Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 125.

The full extent of Murphy's deranged mental state does not become clear until much later in the film. Before the situation develops in the department store, there is a lengthy scene in which the depth of narrative information is extended into Murphy's tormented nightmares, composed with a series of aural and visual distortions and repetitions. The ensuing scenario of hunter and prey in the department store, constructed within a distinctively Gothic mise-en-scene (not unlike that of *The Interview*), cements the oppositions between characters. Murphy is finally defeated, and Jack and David escape with their girlfriends, yet *Dangerous Game* stops just short of answering the questions it has asked, and the final shots show the friends apprehended by the police as they make their way out of the store, and Murphy, seriously injured, staggering down a side alley.

In *Dangerous Game*, ultimately it is the actions and disposition of both Murphy and the group of university students that reveals the lines between 'good' and 'bad', rather than the conclusion of the narrative arc. The scenario in *Kiss or Kill* (Bill Bennett, 1997), however, never offers this kind of certainty. This film is a mutation of the road movie, concerning a couple of petty criminals, Nikki and Al. Their attempt to rob a businessman results in his unexpected death while he attempts to rape Nikki, after she does not allow his sexual advances. The dead man's belongings include a video cassette containing footage of a famous former footballer, Zipper Doyle, engaged in sexual activity with a child. The couple take the video, and try to flee from Adelaide to Perth, but their path is marked by a number of murders. Nikki and Al suspect each other of these murders, and the narrative remains consistently at arms length from allowing anything more than a speculative accusation to be levelled at either character, even after the actual murderer, Adler Jones, is revealed.

Nikki's disposition is explained in the opening scene of the film, depicting her as a child witnessing the violent murder of her mother by her father. Her voiceover during this scene explains Nikki's deep distrust of men. This is echoed throughout the narrative as Nikki experiences moments of apparent introspection, particularly when Alan displays violence or any kind of loss of self control. Following the murder of motel-owner Stan, and an incident in which a road-train nearly runs Nikki and Alan off the road, they argue about trust (this is the only point at which they confront each other openly in this regard), and after a very forced reconciliation, Nikki gives Alan a suggestive sideways glance. The tension remains entirely unresolved, indicating the relationship the couple maintains is a necessity rather than a desire, and that their knowledge of each other is paralleled in their relationship to the landscape they traverse, and people they encounter. In the same manner that they are unable to attain any certainty about each other, they are placed in an equally uncertain physical environment, as "[t]he land [...] preserves its anonymity and unfathomability."²⁴ Alan and Nikki's final retreat to the safety and serenity of coastal Western Australia apparently absolves them of responsibility for their crimes (particularly as their crimes are placed in contrast to the crimes of Zipper Doyle, which are universally despised in the narrative), but it cannot erode their mistrust of each other, which remains centralized to the last moment.

Earlier, as the couple hide out in a former nuclear testing site, their host, and the murderer, Adler, tells them: "You two kids don't play by the rules, but that doesn't mean you're bad." Adler's observation encapsulates the tone of the moral dilemma

²⁴ Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema*, 152.

this film articulates, and indeed it captures the tone of the treatment of crime in all the films mentioned here. The only definitive line that is drawn by *Kiss or Kill* is in relation to Zipper Doyle, whose sexual crimes against children are punished with death. This contrast is enabled solely by the theft of the dead businessman's videotape, which appears as a convenient narrative tool to help absolve Nikki and Alan from ultimately paying for their crimes. All other notions of 'right' or 'wrong' remain unclear, and changeable.

The films I have mentioned above share a thread of resemblance, operating as an undercurrent of moral ambiguity, and ambivalence to moral dilemmas, as well as a considerable voice of dissent concerning the legitimacy of systems of social organization in relation to law and order, and the punishment of crime, which can be notionally linked to the myth of outlaw status covered by Hobsbawm and Seal. Police appear regularly 'flexible' in their methods, and moral judgments made by characters, far from being based on any concrete or universal standards, are in fact based entirely on context. These ideas continue to be explored below, but the films examined articulate these themes quite differently. The films I will look at now place a far greater emphasis on individual characters as the locus of moral problems, as opposed to basing such concerns on the context of circumstances and situations.

The Criminal Character and the (social) Outlaw

The following films each mobilise a different, but distinctly related representation of the trends identified in the examples outlined above, and the associated criminal character(istics), placing much greater emphasis on the characters themselves as the site of moral and social transgression. *Two Hands*, *Dirty Deeds*, *Blackrock* (Vidler,

1997) and *Chopper* are all different in tone, and can be situated at different points of the criminal spectrum in Australian Cinema. *Blackrock*, for example, is a disturbing account of the attitudes towards male relationships that punctuate and validate representations of criminal behaviour throughout Australian cinema, while *Chopper* is both challenging and playful, displaying self-aware ambiguity and ambivalence towards moral and social conventions, despite Chopper's crimes being manifold and serious.

Two Hands is a narrative that demonstrates generic self-awareness, deploying stylistic techniques that ironically diffuse serious concerns regarding the social impact of crime by constructing a series of very blatant, and almost comically violent instances of that very impact. Good guy Jimmy, a bouncer for a strip club, is in debt to Pando, the criminal boss, and finds his position complicated by both his reluctance to commit further crime, and a developing romance. Jimmy opts to rob a bank in order to be able to pay off Pando, an idea which despite his bravado, he is clearly not comfortable with. McFarlane notes (of Jimmy) that "[e]ven behind a balaclava in the botched bank robbery, he keeps our attention on his worried eyes."²⁵ McFarlane is drawn to questioning whether the narrative convenience at work here - the emancipation of Jimmy to an apparently idyllic life of building boats in tropical Queensland - does, in fact, counterbalance the criminal violence that has punctuated the film throughout. He writes "one has to wonder whether these brief hints of moral reclamation really do work affirmatively."²⁶ It is difficult to answer this challenge definitively, as this presupposes that it is the filmmaker's intent to cleanse the violence in the narrative through a return to a peaceful order in which the supposedly innocent Jimmy can go

²⁵ McFarlane, 50.

²⁶ Ibid.

about his life. This concluding situation does indeed generate an uncomfortable position from which to make any moral judgments, but I want to suggest here that this discomfort is constructive in analysing the way the narrative involves, and reacts to, criminal activity. Richard Osborne argues that “crime has become one of the overarching metaphors of the real social crisis that besets advanced capitalist countries.”²⁷ I would extend this by saying crime, particularly in film, serves to divert attention from what Osborne calls real social crisis. Crime itself is not presented as inherently good or bad, but rather simply a product of some kind of social or cultural breakdown. In light of this observation, it is pertinent to note the way the narrative restores another of the plotlines. Ultimately the ‘bad guys’ are killed by a street kid, exacting revenge for the death of his friend, killed by the criminals’ careless driving. The child coolly and methodically walks into Hando’s ‘office’ and guns down all of the gangsters. This revenge driven violence reinstates a sort of equilibrium, while simultaneously avoiding any moral repercussion of the murders the child has committed. In this regard, *Two Hands*, and indeed similar films like *Dirty Deeds* pose difficult questions. Are the moral trajectories of the film commensurate with the narrative trajectories, and do those narrative trajectories sufficiently address and redress the moral trajectories? McFarlane writes that “the film draws its strength from the trajectory of Jimmy’s lurching from street barker to wholesome boat-builder in Queensland.”²⁸ In this sense, the film does represent a turning away from criminal activity, as the hero does not let himself become ‘one of the boys’ like so many other males in Australian cinema. This situation, however, simply perpetuates the overarching narrative construction common to many of the films I have examined in

²⁷ Richard Osborne, “Crime and the Media: From Media Studies to Post-modernism,” in *Crime and the Media: The Post-Modern Spectacle*, eds. David Kidd-Hewitt and Richard Osborne (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 31.

²⁸ McFarlane, 50.

this chapter, and this dissertation as a whole. While a primary narrative imbalance has been addressed, a state of equilibrium restored for the protagonist, the wider socio-cultural system constructed by the film has failed to account for this imbalance. The larger issues of social decay, for want of a better expression, have been left largely untouched, perhaps necessarily, by the focus on an individual within that social system.

Chopper is a slightly different take on this kind of moral situation, owing to the necessity for narrative system to entice the viewer to empathize with the Eric Bana's character. The story is seductive, able to repress the actuality of the murder for which Mark Brandon Read was tried but not convicted in 1987,²⁹ represented during a scene which is both climactic and powerful. However, the relationship between the film and the event on which a portion is based is secondary here to the consideration of the way the narrative is able to move fluidly around a consistent, or conventional moral position. Laura Carroll argues that "[t]he presence within the movie of brutality and criminality is irrelevant to its moral dilemma."³⁰ For Carroll this dilemma is founded in the simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the character of Chopper, based on a real person in the real world, represented with not a small amount of comical charm in Dominik's film. The film plays with the boundaries of fiction and reality, emphasising the potentially spurious series of claims made by Read in relation to his criminal activity that motivate the plot. Operating firmly within the grasp of the cultural discourse surrounding Chopper in Australian popular culture, the film poses many questions about this person, but ultimately answers very few. Chopper tells a warden, "never let the truth get in the way of a good yarn," and the indefinite nature of any

²⁹ Laura Carroll, "Chopper, or Adventures in the Standover Trade," *Metro* 124/125 (2000): 90.

³⁰ Ibid.

actual ‘facts’ in relation to the character of Chopper, other than those that he utters himself, moderated and filtered through the characters of the police (who remain largely in the dark, alongside the viewer) with whom he interacts, serves to destabilize any claim to truth on which questions in the narrative might be based. This is a narrative based on shifting quantities, and as such, with no clear ‘evidence’ for narrative situations, there is no clear ground on which to base moral concerns, and this is perhaps a deliberate strategy of the film. The narrative sequence is, at all times, secondary to the concerns based in the characterization.

Keeping the emphasis more on the side of character than narrative, *Blackrock* (Steven Vidler, 1997) “focuses on the male offenders and the exploration of them as “victims” of class, masculinity, and mateship.”³¹ The crime in this film is apparently secondary, in terms of narrative emphasis, to the scathing portrayal of the naturalism of male complicity in relation to rape. Philip Butterss argues that “[t]he rape and murder function as a way to explore mateship, which is depicted as a bond between males that excludes women.”³² The film’s narrative arc is motivated primarily by the torment suffered by the male lead, Jared, as he negotiates his guilt. He has witnessed people he knows raping a girl, but has not disclosed this information. His loyalty to Ricko, an old mate who has recently returned - and has also promptly started ‘undoing’ Jared’s life plans - is ultimately revealed as futile, and bound to meaninglessness, yet the importance of the culture of mateship, of loyalty at all costs, remains key to the problems Jared faces. *Blackrock* is distinctly different from the other films mentioned here as the tension between the male characters is not (explicitly) driven by

³¹ Felicity Holland and Jane O’ Sullivan, “‘Lethal larrikins’: cinematic subversions of mythical masculinities in *Blackrock* and *The Boys*,” *Antipodes* 13, no. 2 (1999): 82.

³² Philip Butterss, “When Being a Man is All You’ve Got: Masculinity in Romper Stomper, Idiot Box, *Blackrock* and *The Boys*,” *Metro* 117 (1998): 43.

manipulation and coercion. The criminal character in this film is problematic because of the normality with which he functions. Ricko is clearly a psychotically violent male, but more importantly than this, he is an integral, almost mythical part of the surfing community. As is the case in so many other narratives of this nature, the criminal action is, in part, seen as forgivable, owing to the status of the male as 'beyond' judgement. *Blackrock* examines the bonds of this kind of futile mateship, and indeed notions of the meaning of masculinity within a predominantly male community, and develops a position wherein Jared functions as the locus of the moral work performed by the film. I'd suggest that a kind of critical ambiguity is enacted in this film, as Jared's final decisions fail to condemn Ricko entirely, even while the narrative does so. By placing a portion of the moral resolution within the torment of the character of Jared, the film leaves the crime in question in a subordinate position to the pain of being torn between friendship and moral or social conscience. The suspension between competing positions here is not fully resolved, thus the film performs a more subtle critique of the moral recalcitrance of the masculine cultures it represents, alongside the actual narrative resolution.

To turn, again, in a completely different direction, *The Proposition* is a film about crime, Australian identities, rural myths and colonialism. It has been called a western, and could perhaps even be viewed from the position of delineating social issues. I am tempted to argue that this film alone is representative of a large portion of the aims of this thesis, such is its scope in relation to the undercurrents that exist in Australian Cinema. Despite suffering from considerable criticism in relation to character

development and narrative vagueness,³³ I have included the film in this section, when it clearly could be included in others, as the narrative focus on the instability of a stable moral position in relation to crime and punishment stands out, for me, above the other thematic suggestions as centrally important. Furthermore, this film represents outlaws in a literal manner that the other films here do not. The film portrays the story of outlaw Charlie Burns, who, after being captured with his younger brother, is informed by Captain Stanley, an English policeman, that in order to save his younger brother from hanging he must kill his older brother, who remains at large. The implications this 'deal' generates for all the characters in the story are considerable, as each is affected in ways that are initially unexpected. The insubordination of the officers working for Stanley leads to the climactic scene in which he and his wife are attacked by Arthur Burns. Charlie Burns turns away from his violent older brother and realises that he must, in fact, conform to Stanley's wishes to save himself, regardless of the implications for his younger brother.

The director claims that the film allowed the actors to "explore moral ambiguities and the dark side of human nature,"³⁴ and the narrative is literally laden with such ambiguities. Hillcoat explains that it was important to emphasize "failure in our Australian history, tainted and morally compromised by violence."³⁵ The undercurrent of the failure of the male is rife throughout films dealing with the landscape, and with the myth of the Australian male explored in detail in Chapter Two. Most well developed in *The Proposition* are the failures of Captain Stanley and Charlie Burns to successfully achieve their goals, and thus, their inability to generate any sense of

³³ See Dave Hoskin, "Marked by Darkness and by Blood and One Thousand Powder-Burns: The Proposition," *Metro* 146/47 (2005), 22-27.

³⁴ Peter Krausz, "The Making of an Australian Western: John Hillcoat and *The Proposition*," *Metro* 146/147 (2005): 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

moral absolutes. Stanley's insistence that he will "civilize this place" articulates a futility that is echoed throughout the full spectrum of Australian narratives dealing with the inhospitable reality of the landscape. The polarization of Captain Stanley's small, English rose garden with the bleak, dead Australian interior neatly encapsulates this futility. Burns' inability to save the life of his younger brother despite the final success in killing his older brother, also generates the sense of acquiescence to circumstance, rather than control over it. The Australian landscape, in this instance, necessarily destabilizes the foundations on which moral distinctions are to be made. The film suspends the viewer between opposing characters, both of whom the narrative elicits sympathy for, in the context of a developing cultural circumstance operating under the weight of English colonial authority and Australian independence and rebellion.

Ambiguity, or perhaps more specifically, uncertainty, is central to the plot of *The Interview* (Monahan, 1998), which commences with a totally bewildered, vulnerable, and visually unassuming man being arrested by a group of what appear to be overly aggressive and zealous policemen, who then take him to a police station for questioning. Moral concerns are not implicated in the narrative immediately, and the advancement of the story is careful and intriguing, skirting around any sense of certainty, allowing little chance to form anything more than the most basic of guesses as the nature of the interviewee, Eddie Fleming. He is suspected of stealing a car, but the accusations evolve into suspicion of kidnapping and murder. Initially Eddie is frightened, reserved, and in a completely inferior position, both mentally and physically. Information becomes clear only as it becomes clear to Eddie, and as the story indicates his growing confidence, a power shift occurs, and the police become

uneasy. Eddie starts to play with the police, aggravating them and using their behaviour to his advantage. The issue of the power relationship between police and civilians is clearly central to the narrative, and is encapsulated by the dialogue between Eddie and his solicitor, advising him, essentially, to do and say nothing, and not to trust the police. Further destabilizing the authority of the police is the investigative team who are monitoring the conduct of Detective Sergeant John Steele, who is conducting the interview.

The film uses a highly stylized mise-en-scene; a particularly colourless and grainy visage of a dark, gothic looking police station, complete with archaic arched windows (through which nothing can be seen other than light), old wooden furniture, and suggestively noir lighting. Shot transition between the police station interior, bustling with activity, to the interview room is repeatedly achieved via the intermediate location of a closed circuit television monitor, which is later revealed as being watched by members of the team investigating Steele. The visual style - claustrophobic, largely colourless, and tightly framed - exerts an expectancy on the narrative events that is never fully realized. The conclusion is reminiscent of *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1995), in which it ultimately becomes clear that the person undergoing the interview is, in all possibility, the very criminal he never appeared likely to be. However, this is not made clear beyond all doubt, and the unanswered questions left lingering by the narrative are indicative of the uncertainty surrounding the role of the police in the system of justice.

Debi Enker encapsulates the path many of these narratives concerning crime negotiate through moral terrain. She suggests that:

The vast majority of Australian cinematic heroes, and certainly the definitive ones, are male. They are men who stand apart from the group, perhaps by virtue of their skills as horsemen or warriors, rarely by virtue of their prowess as lovers or their capacity as intellectuals. They are characters who live life instinctively, by their own codes of honour, whether or not these codes are common to the community that they inhabit.³⁶

I would suggest that these comments also encapsulate the ‘villains’ in the narratives discussed here, however the differentiation comes in the positioning of the characters in relation to ‘the group’; the actual behaviour of hero and villain never really appears as fundamentally different. Words like ‘honour’, and ideas about living life instinctively are echoed through the characters who use such things to sanitize their wrongdoing. A rape and murder in *Blackrock* is not reported by a male out of a misplaced sense of duty between so-called mates, and in *Chopper* a known criminal is portrayed as humorous, and I would even go so far as to say charming, largely because of his own ‘code’ of conduct. Perhaps most disturbingly, the armed robberies in *Two Hands* and *Idiot Box* appear to be a necessity, rather than a crime, owing to the apparently unfair rules of society, which apparently exclude the males from social potency.

One thing has been eminently clear throughout this chapter: social and moral conventions have been portrayed by Australian cinema dealing with criminal activity as inherently flexible, and entirely contextual. I don’t want to suggest that such flexibility is unavoidably a bad thing, but rather, that there is a sense in Australian cinema that justice is not, and has never been, a stable concept. The thread, or undercurrent that runs through this kind of cinema is a consistent articulation of doubt and uncertainty regarding systems of social organization. It is however, removed from

³⁶ Debi Enker, , “Australia and the Australians,” in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 218.

the undercurrents present in science fiction cinema. Where science fiction cinema represents social systems as out-of-reach, inherently unstable and potentially dangerous, crime in Australian cinema questions the very basis on which we formulate systems of social organization, through the articulation of doubt and uncertainty about moral and social conventions that might otherwise be considered to be immutable.

Chapter Seven - Undercurrents and Genre in Australian Cinema



Two Hands (Gregor Jordan, 1999)

Australian cinema [in the 1990s] began to address constituencies effaced in the drive towards the national representation, to propel micro-narratives set within micro-geographies, to relish eccentricity rather than the emblematic, and to refuse the whole burden of representativeness with which cinema had been saddled in the 1970s. Ironically, of course, in doing so, the invocation of suburbia, often seems to have touched upon a sense of national 'authenticity' which had functioned as something of a Holy Grail for the 'official' cinema of the 1970s.¹

Australian art has tended, until quite recently, to be 'anachronistically' concerned with 'primitive' themes.²

It is clear that there are two centrally important points to come out of the preceding textual analysis. Firstly, genre films offer a distinctive space in which, despite criticisms directed at the tension between the cinematic trajectories of art and entertainment, the concerns of a national cinema can effectively be played out. Craven's words might be read as suggesting that, in fact, it is in the local articulations of the generic that Australian cinema finds its Australian-ness, rather than in the vestiges of the 'AFC' genre.³ Secondly, Australian cinema carries in its generic products a deep and complex sense of mistrust, misanthropy and instability - undercurrents of malevolence that exhibit little regard for genre, style or critical acclaim. These undercurrents might be described as intertextual points of identification that both destabilize and reinforce systems of generic separation in Australian cinema. I have used the word undercurrents through much of this thesis in a fairly oblique manner. In compiling this project it has become clearer that from a pragmatic analytical perspective these undercurrents might more accurately be described as transgressive intersections. In each of the chapters the most revealing of cultural and social interpretations, offered by myself and the theorists on whose work

¹ Ian Craven, "Australian Cinema Towards the Millenium," in *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, ed. Ian Craven (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 8.

² Ross Gibson, "Formative landscapes," in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 50.

³ For an explication of the AFC genre, see Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia volume 2: Anatomy of a National Cinema* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987), 28-37.

mine extends, are found within texts in the blurring of boundaries between conventional philosophical, narrative, social and stylistic categories. A primary example can be found in the stylistic and generic *mélange* of Australian Gothic. Rayner suggests that Australian Gothic “recruits a panoply of generic forms,” and is “hybridized and self-conscious.”⁴ The dirty boundaries between genres are the regions which the Gothic exploits, through play in meaning and representation, and are where critical analysis finds itself unavoidably focussed. This project has extended that kind of analytical focus across a range of texts that demonstrate transgressions, or at least, intersections, between categories; be they textual, social, or philosophical. The undercurrents in Australian Cinema - those indefinite characteristics that offer insight into malevolence and misanthropy in Australian culture - are in fact the textual representation of those moments in which categories are obscured and mixed. The crossing of boundaries, the identification of nodes of intertextual convergence, and the paradoxical opportunities afforded by popular cultural texts to both challenge and sustain the dominant cultural order have been central to this thesis to this point.

This final chapter will draw these undercurrents together in relation to their function within the milieu of Australian cinema, and their relationship to the long-standing debates regarding the tension between generic cinema and ‘quality’ cinema. I will move through the undercurrents established in each chapter in order to identify and develop links and shared theoretical territory, before then discussing how these undercurrents are instrumental in understanding the way genre cinema functions as a valuable and inextricable aspect of Australian national cinema. In each section of this thesis Tom O’Regan’s claims have been amplified. Australian cinema is indeed

⁴ Jonathan Rayner, ““Terror Australis”: Areas of Horror in the Australian Cinema,” in *Horror International*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 112.

concerned primarily with the human proportions of narrative fiction, and in each category it is clear that the main undercurrent I have identified is related directly to the consequences of human actions or dispositions. The main undercurrent in the films explored in Chapter Five, for example, highlighted a specific perception of futility among characters in relation to the complex systems of social organization which are presented as clearly out of reach, even given the fantastic, futuristic situations. Characters across Australian cinema routinely appear, knowingly or otherwise, to be entirely at the whim of their situation, and largely unable to activate any real agency in their predicaments. McFarlane and Mayer (following Turner) have noted this trend, suggesting that a good portion of Australian films “conclude with a sense of alienation and powerlessness with regard to the ability of the central characters to control or even influence their world.”⁵ The focus of the narratives in Chapter Five on the situations of the characters reveals that the systems of social organization to which they have no access are only present through implication. The narratives remain tightly and closely aligned with the specific and personal contexts played out within, and the representation of broader concerns is implicated largely through absence. *One Night Stand*, for example, portrays a group of people isolated from warring governments that are never directly represented, while *Incident at Raven’s Gate* keeps its characters largely ensconced within the rural domestic sphere, despite the alarming and fantastic goings on. To commence then, it is essential that some reflections on undercurrents, and the way in which they operate in and around each other, are brought together, before examining the implications this thesis has generated for analysis of generic cinema forms in the context of a national cinema.

⁵ Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer, *New Australian Cinema: Sources and Parallels in American and British Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 240.

Undercurrents: Tracking Threads of Resemblance

I have, in each chapter of this thesis, delineated threads of resemblance between the narratives I examined, that I have called undercurrents.⁶ These undercurrents operate separately from the machinations of genre, yet are not totally independent of such, and serve to highlight the potential of genre for articulating issues and concerns that exist in the world outside of the cinematic frame, without relying solely on generic formulations as explanatory mechanisms. I have argued that these undercurrents help to forge strong links between the films in which they appear, and between the representations on screen, and the cultural (particularly social and political) contexts of their production. It is now necessary to identify and assess the way these undercurrents function in relation to each other, and the implications of this interaction for film analysis and cultural analysis.

When placed under scrutiny, patterns of recurrent narrative and thematic (and indeed stylistic) material that are relevant to social and cultural criticism emerge from generic Australian cinema. The films examined by this thesis have demonstrated quite clear trends of character disconnection, futility of action, powerlessness with respect to social organization, alienation from social organization (specifically, family and community), failure of characters to assert any real agency on situations, and as a result, failure to bring about or resolve a situation actively, and finally, a sense of disregard in relation to moral conventions, instead opting for judgments relative to individual situations or contexts. These undercurrents are present throughout the films covered, but appear to be loosely aligned in the categories I have formed. While I

⁶ As mentioned in Chapter Five, I am using the term ‘threads of resemblance’ in a manner similar to Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances, explored in relation to Australian cinema in David Thomas and Garry Gillard, “Threads of Resemblance in New Australian Gothic Cinema,” *Metro* 136 (2003), 36-44.

have stressed that the individual sections of this thesis have not been formulated with the intention of reproducing specific genres, they are of course gathered together through similarity rather than difference. The undercurrents I have identified, while cutting across genres, do find focus in the generic similarities of many of the texts mentioned. Importantly though, these undercurrents are not specific to genres, nor are they bound to a particular visual or narrative style. Representations of males in rural settings, for example, are marked by a series of failures within narratives, particularly in relation to individual agency and alienation from social organization. These narratives operate primarily against the backdrop of a landscape that pervades every aspect of existence, establishing a sense of the necessity of acquiescence. However, these ‘failings’ and this demand for acquiescence operate and find resonance in texts outside of the rural realm, throughout the genres of horror, science fiction and the social issues and crime films I have covered.

The first undercurrent I examined related to these rural environments. In Chapter Two I suggested that fiction in which landscape plays a significant role in Australia routinely articulates a struggle *against* the environment, expressing a desire on the part of the characters to colonize and conquer that almost invariably fails. That the cultural artifacts of a colonial nation should articulate such a pattern so frequently has a dual significance. As the films covered demonstrated, a portion of the myth of the Australian ‘type’ expresses a cultural longing for the pioneer, rural, and by association, ‘natural’ life. Yet ironically, “intractability” appears as the most prominent characteristic of landscape in Australian fictions.⁷ A tension is implicit in narratives of the landscape between romanticism for the idyllic bush and the realism

⁷ Gibson, 49.

of surviving in a hostile environment. Owing to the naturalization of the characteristics of the mythical Australian (by his direct association with the equally 'natural' landscape), scepticism about the myth of the Australian national type can appear decidedly unnatural (and, of course, un-Australian). However, Chapter Two established that the mystical status attached to the landscape and the subsequent articulations of the Australian type is incommensurate with the routine failures characters suffer. To succeed in the outback of Australian cinema means abandoning hopes of success, and instead giving in to simple survival, as opposed to mastery or prosperity. Teacher John Grant must cease to fight against the grotesque rural males he encounters before he reaches any sort of resolution to his hopeless situation in Tiboonda. Only after he stops fighting the landscape – attempting to impose his Englishness onto it, and its inhabitants – does he find a way to actually come to terms with it. Equally, shearer Jack Foley is driven to accept his failures as a male, and as a shearer who is past his physical prime, in order to remain relevant within his social realm. He can only find meaning in his experiences when he accepts that his status as the best shearer has been lost, and that he is now most useful as 'one of the boys' in a fight against workplace inequity. As Dave Hoskin has put it, "the Outback is a place for surviving in rather than a place for new life."⁸

This is, of course, no new observation; Tim Burstall wrote, in 1977, that "[i]t is as if there is an unwritten law of Australia that men must be victims, losers,"⁹ and it is a perspective that continues to find relevance in contemporary articulations of the male in rural, and urban Australia, and his connections, and disconnections, from the

⁸ Dave Hoskin, "Marked by Darkness and by Blood and One Thousand Powder-Burns: *The Proposition*," *Metro* 146/147 (2005), 24.

⁹ Tim Burstall, "Twelve Genres of Australian Film," in *An Australian Film Reader*, eds. Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985), 220.

mythical Australian type. Clearly the thematic preoccupation with the failure of men, in relation to both physical and social situations, is well developed and widespread.

To use Debi Enker's words:

The male characters exist in an oppressive cycle: hard physical work, hard drinking and hard gambling. They are seen as highly competitive: being the best fighter, the fastest shearer, best shot with a gun or biggest drinker are prized titles. [...] Like the suburban communities, the outback settlements are seen as insular and limited, suspicious of outsiders and prone to putting newcomers through arduous initiation rites in order to earn a place in the group. They are places that usually test and break the human spirit, condemning their inhabitants to lives of soulless conformity. [...] characters who refuse to abide by the conventions, or battle to break free of them, are often cast as heroes [...] whether they win or not.¹⁰

When the landscape is aestheticized and mythologized, as is the prerequisite for the perpetuation of the myth of the Australian rural male, a relocation of perspective occurs. Jonathan Smith writes, "we believe ourselves to have stepped out of history when we step into an aestheticized landscape."¹¹ In moving 'outside' of history in this manner, the myths of Australia are consequently relieved of culpability for the social misdeeds of a colonising population. Furthermore, Smith observes that "landscape, regarded as a visual text, tends to decontextualize both its subject and its objects, and become what Roland Barthes would call an 'empty sign'."¹² Positing an aspect of natural, unmediated significance to the visual representations of the landscape serves to provide a moral and social backdrop that appears immutable and natural. Filmic articulations of rural populations, however, repeatedly critique these ideas, either explicitly in their narratives, or in the form of undercurrents, as I have suggested. As mentioned, *Wake in Fright* portrays the failure of a man who can never see the Australian male in his own reflection, and who is marked by his differences from this

¹⁰ Debi Enker, "Australia and the Australians," in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 216.

¹¹ Jonathan Smith, "The Lie that Blinds: Destabilizing the Text of Landscape," in *Place/Culture/Representation*, eds. James Duncan and David Ley (London: Routledge, 1993), 80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

identity. *Sunday Too Far Away* demonstrates the lack of identification with the mythic Australian that is experienced even by those men who are ‘in’ with ‘the boys’. The undercurrent of failure permeates representations of the mythical Australian, even within what might be called typically ‘Australian’ stories. These kinds of Australian film are demonstrative of the questioning aspect provided by undercurrents, as each of the characters is forced to confront their own failure, and ultimately are consigned to a kind of pragmatic, melancholic surrender.

A perspective that can be deployed to link the rural with the urban is advanced by Rayner, who notes that these “tinges of melancholy and deafeatism [...] afflict the larrikin, whose belligerence towards authority is the clearest admission of inferiority.”¹³ The social issues films I examined raise an important consideration; that the undercurrents operating within these narratives are in fact related to the human aspects of the narrative, rather than the varying issues of the decay, or dysfunction of social organization. In keeping with Rayner, it is the belligerence of inferiority that appears as crucial to the disposition of characters with the social issues, or drama narrative. The decay at work in these films is routinely human, in the face of systems of social organization that remain unchanging, and unsympathetic to the concerns of individuals. *Tom White* is perhaps the most apposite example to illustrate this undercurrent. While social decay is implied through the plight of individuals, the narrative contrasts these ‘broken’ people with a functioning society. The social issues under examination are personal and individual in nature, and only implicate wider problems by association, and not by any accusatory specifics. Tom White’s series of acquaintances all operate on the periphery of conventional social organization, as

¹³ Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 174.

unfortunate ‘others’ to some presumed social centre; a reformed junkie, an older homeless man, and a working class child with a criminal for a father.

Chapter Three examined the idea of the suburban, and to a lesser extent the urban, location as primarily an ideological realm, as a location immune to decay or disorder by nature of its connotations as a site of equality, freedom, and commodity-based organization. Chris Healy suggests that the suburb operates to “hold together and enunciate a sometimes attenuated sense of self in the world.”¹⁴ The idea that a location can be a socio-psychological frame for personal experience figures strongly throughout social issues narratives, and is ironically a major constituent of the undercurrent of alienation from systems of social organization. As long as the suburban experience is contextualized by the imagined location it occupies, it will remain removed from any tangible accessibility by characters who do not fit the identities that such imaginings prescribe. The unchanging and unsympathetic systems of social organization at work are, in fact, systems based in an ideological location as much as a real, physical location, and as such exclusion and alienation are rife within narratives that problematize either of these locations. O’Regan regards social problematization as a tool of cinema, he calls it one of the ‘cultural materials’ mobilized by cinema, alongside other technical and financial resources.¹⁵ In terms of these narratives depicting personal and social conflict and struggle in both rural and urban locations, it is important to realize that O’Regan’s claim implies a practical dimension to social situations, within the milieu of national cinema output. These narratives employ and deploy socio-cultural situations and contexts to specific ends, both shaping, and being shaped by the locations they reproduce. He writes:

¹⁴ Chris Healy, Introduction to *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Cultures in Australian Suburbs*, eds. Sarah Ferber, Chris Healy and Chris McAuliffe (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), xvii.

¹⁵ Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 284.

“Australian cinema inevitably shapes this culture [...] and is in turn shaped by it, it intersects with and articulates various social and national identities.”¹⁶

Chapter Three concentrated on the kinds of identities that films depicting social issues articulate, and to what ends. *Bad Boy Bubby*, *The Boys*, *Bliss*, and *Tom White*, for example, all articulate a particular and different kind of relationship between the individual and the social context. The notion that concerns of social decay operate as undercurrents was brought into focus. I suggested, in fact, that the idea of social dysfunction as an undercurrent, in the sense of something that is not immediately accessible, appeared to be patently inoperable, as social issues are self-evidently the cornerstones of these narratives. Heeding O'Regan though, it is possible to situate the social as subordinate to the personal dimensions evident in narratives. Undercurrents, as I have explicated them, function in a way that is not necessarily obscure or abstract, but rather as another level of resemblance between texts, alongside genre. As such, identifying the human dimensions of socially challenging narrative situations reveals that these aspects of films are heavily imbued with intertextual elaboration and connection, and function to bring undercurrents articulating malevolence and discordance to critical attention.

Undercurrents of alienation, of loss of identity, and of transgressive identities in these texts function as the thematic underpinning of the narrative progression. The films covered in Chapter Three address the thematic significance of violence, racism, misogyny and decay quite directly, yet the way that these ideas are not centralized in the same manner as the other human elements is instructive. Following from the

¹⁶ Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 19.

examination of identities in Chapter Two, the struggling and peripheral identities within the social issues and urban drama films implicate the major role of individual contexts, as opposed to wider social concerns. The inability of characters to function as part of the ideologically and socially supported systems of organization is paramount, in that it highlights the distinction between social destabilization, and the destabilization of individual identity within an unchangeable and unsympathetic social order. O'Regan writes that:

Film-making is implicated in processes of popular socialization and social problem solving (locating social problems, identifying their causes, developing solutions for them). Social activists and film and cultural critics routinely evaluate films for their transmission of cultural values and their stance towards contemporary public issues.¹⁷

In terms of the undercurrents of social dis-ease I want to emphasize, however, I would suggest that this social problem solving operates at a much more specific, human level.

Following directly from the human dimensions of the social drama, and extending on the notion of transgression in relation to identities, the horror films covered in Chapter Four reveal a different kind of undercurrent. Horror films share a distinct aspect of transgression, of blurring borders and exploiting dirty boundaries between categories that cut across text and culture. I would argue that the horror is often the least overt form in relation to its cultural representativeness, but functions at a cultural level by mobilising undercurrents that articulate broader and less specific ideas about nation and identity, often addressing anachronistic cultural 'fears' and social problems while avoiding distinctly localized issues. These are films that repeatedly articulate transgression as a pervasive and widespread undercurrent. I argued, following the lead

¹⁷ O'Regan, 18.

of theorists including Kristeva, Tudor, and Jancovich, that the importance of horror cinema is in the way that it operates in the spaces between conventional oppositions and categories. *Wolf Creek* exploits the play in the categories of fiction and non-fiction, while *Patrick* opposes and disrupts the categories of living and dead. *Visitors* questions the distinction between reality and hallucination, suggesting that perception is subject to total corruption, and *Lost Things* portrays a situation in which nothing is able to be relied on, and nothing can be known beyond doubt. The undercurrent present in these narratives is directed in a specifically national manner, using oppositions to challenge the categories they establish. Assumptions are overturned, and the categories through which characters access their environment are shown to be decidedly unreliable, and potentially spurious.

I have suggested that the horror film is subject to challenges concerning its validity as a cultural artifact worthy of analysis, particularly from the popular press. Historically a genre of paradox - containing both economically driven exploitation and genuinely meaningful social critique - I suggested that the status horror occupies, as generic cinema, does not detract from its critical potential. By mobilising horror films in a manner that embraces their commodity status, while not deriding their potential as cultural artifacts, the undercurrents of transgression as a cultural taboo inform and instruct social criticism. Horror cinema in Australia is the exemplar of the argument I will develop later in this chapter, that generic cinema is enhanced by national specificity. Horror has long been regarded as potentially articulating serious socio-cultural concerns, as was made clear in Chapters One and Four, and local productions of international genre formulations generate undercurrents that step beyond the conventions of generic characteristics as the basis of serious critical inquiry.

Closely linked to horror is science fiction, which is a genre that shares some theoretical ground with the rural and urban narratives, in that it articulates a thematic undercurrent relating to the perceived powerlessness of central characters.¹⁸ The specific incarnation in this genre relates not so much to alienation or impotence in the directly accessible realm of interpersonal social interaction, but rather in the broader systems of socio-cultural organization and governance. Each film covered in Chapter Five represented a character divorced quite specifically from the governing bodies, or power-brokers in their social circumstance. This particularly strong undercurrent in science fiction was described, essentially, as a pervasive sense of futility in the socio-political realm. Interestingly, where the undercurrents in horror films suggested the permeability of categorical distinctions, Australian science fiction repeatedly represents situations in which categories are totally unable to be challenged. While these positions seem, at first, to be incommensurate, they can be accounted for. I suggested early in Chapter Five that an important distinction between science fiction and horror was in the ‘direction’ of their thematic gaze. Science fiction, as suggested by Barry K. Grant, tends to look ‘outwards’, while horror remains focussed ‘inwards’.¹⁹ The categories to which horror directs its disruptive attention are primarily those concerning the self, whereas science fiction is concerned more with the outward contexts of social and cultural organization, and the inability of characters to affect change on such systems.

¹⁸ See McFarlane and Mayer, 240, and Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, film and the construction of Australian narrative*, 2nd ed. (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 54-86.

¹⁹ Barry Keith Grant, “‘Sensuous Elaboration’: Reason and the Visible in the Science Fiction Film,” in *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 18.

Incident at Raven's Gate, for example, clearly demonstrates the undercurrent of futility of individual actions within a larger system, as the Cleary brothers struggle (unsuccessfully) to come to terms with their domestic situation in the context of the larger problem of an alien encounter, and the subsequent power exerted by a mysterious government agent. There is a less clear, but identifiable thread of moral uncertainty within science fiction narratives in Australia. Several of the films covered portrayed the inability of characters to develop a coherent or consistent set of moral codes, and this has a strong and direct link to the crime narratives I discussed in Chapter Six.

The thread of resemblance in Australian science fiction is the result of the relationship constructed between characters and their situations, and in particular, the inability of characters to effectively exact their will on the larger social context. Aspects of the character dispositions are directly reminiscent of those found in the other kinds of films covered, in that there is a distinct sense of melancholy and resignation in the face of apparently insurmountable problems of varying kinds. John Murdoch fails to discover what is real in *Dark City*, and must instead be content with a pragmatic solution - accepting what he thinks should be real. Max Rockatansky is, from the very outset, resigned to a life of survival on the highways, and his resolution is not out of choice, but is instead a result of his essentially hopeless situation. It is, then, the apparent inability to escape the larger problems that instructs portions of the narrative trajectories of these films. It has been suggested that characters in science fiction films, generally, "overcome some especially horrible excrescence of their society without even trying to deal with the fundamental evil, which remains omnipotent and

unassailable.”²⁰ I have suggested that the unassailable evil in the case of Australian science fiction is the social order, or perhaps more accurately the social hierarchy. As such is it clear that science fiction in Australia is very much a social form.

Where science fiction hints at moral uncertainties, narratives containing a crime as a central motivating concern demonstrate a very distinct and centralized pattern of moral ambivalence and ambiguity. I examined, in Chapter Six, films including *Blackrock*, *Chopper*, *Dirty Deeds*, and *Idiot Box* in order to demonstrate the very strong undercurrent of doubt concerning absolute moral standards. The characters in these films consistently mobilize notions of duty and honour in relation to their crimes and friends respectively, yet such notions seem paradoxically absent in relation to society more widely. To illustrate, *Chopper* is a complex film, playing with the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, and modes of storytelling with sophisticated and self-aware revelry. Chopper himself is at once amoral, aggressive and unpredictably violent, yet oddly charismatic and loyal. At no point is there any suggestion of an absolute system of moral conventions, and the behaviour of the anti-hero and other criminals never really appears as fundamentally different. There is no real space in the narrative to ascribe moral boundaries. Equally, *Blackrock* portrays a situation in which a young man is reluctant to provide information to police about a rape, yet he is ‘tortured’ by his split loyalties between doing what is right, and what his mates expect, owing to a misplaced sense of duty. Of importance to this undercurrent of moral ambiguity and ambivalence is a duality to the perception of crime. I demonstrated, through myths of the outlaw, and the subsequent permutation of the Australian larrikin, that crime appears frequently as a necessity for the lower class,

²⁰ H. Bruce Franklin, “Visions of the Future in Science Fiction Films from 1970 to 1982,” in “Cultural Theory and Science Fiction Cinema”, in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 29.

and the criminal and lower classes are treated as essentially interchangeable by their position in relation to the unfair 'rules' of society, which are presented as removing their social agency.

The undercurrent shared by the very disparate crime narratives I examined is a perspective that treats the moral judgments of criminal activity as inherently flexible, and entirely contextual. The films, generally, articulated a distinct aspect of injustice perpetrated primarily against the criminal, and as such suggested that the idea of justice is not stable or reliable. Nikki and Al run from the law in *Kiss or Kill*, yet are simultaneously running, as is expected in a road movie, from the injustices of a society to which they can never fully belong. In *Money Movers*, the Darcy brothers' attempt to carry out a massive robbery is contextualized by the rich business owner, and equally rich criminal boss, both being represented as a social force to struggle against. The thread, or undercurrent that runs through all of these films, despite their variations on similar generic representational strategies, is a consistent notion of mistrust and uncertainty towards the social system that has apparently kept the characters imprisoned.

Chapter Six investigated perhaps the broadest selection of films, and this is indicative of the pervasive nature of crime in Australian cinema. I suggested that outlaw tales, and ideals of rebellion against the British, form a significant portion of our cultural mythology. As is commensurate with a broad group of films, this undercurrent of moral ambiguity is equally broad, and is evident throughout nearly all of the films I have covered in this project. The rural narratives concerning male identities, social issues films portraying the drama of human degradation, horror films questioning

boundaries of conceptual schema, and science fiction texts representing the distance between individual and the apparatus of social organization, all inevitably partake in the final undercurrent I identified, concerning unstable social and moral conventions. Undercurrents of this order function as a side-effect of the specific and local articulations of broader systems of cinema classification, which will now be examined further.

Undercurrents, Genre and Nation

Australian cinema is punctuated very distinctly by phases in production, yet generic productions have been a consistent presence. To continue using the Gothic as an example, this style of filmmaking came to prominence in the 1970s, during a phase of re-invigoration in the industry as a source of national pride. Subsequently, it has been a consistent presence through the much-derided 10BA period of the 1980s, and through the quirky phase of the early 1990s. The Gothic has developed and mutated in unison with the changing industrial and socio-cultural contexts of these phases. Australian Gothic is, as a result, a very distinct genre and style, with strong and clearly discernable differences from its American counterpart. While the foundations of the style and philosophical perspective are, in the main, the same, the nationally specific history and development of the category generates distinctly local implications.²¹

In light of this I want to suggest that Australian cinema is, and has been for some time, largely a generic cinema, or at the very least, a cinema that is marked by cycles and styles that impact directly on its generic output. I would argue that the current

²¹ See Thomas and Gillard, 36-44

phase is based on a gritty and socially motivated realism, and has emerged as something of a response to the ‘quirky’ cinema of the first half of the 1990s, and focuses quite closely on un-cosmetic human drama, and in particular, drama in relation to masculinity. The sentiments of the social realist film, some with a distinctly socio-political flavour, have been a strong presence in local productions for the past decade.²² Cycles such as these involve the production of more or less generic films that capture, or express, something of the social, historical and industrial context of production. Accordingly, generic films do not float freely around the trends and concerns of the national industry, but rather function as an aspect of this cultural expression and reproduction. In Chapter Five I used the writing of Annette Kuhn, in relation to the cultural instrumentality of genre. I would suggest, in an Australian context, that the cultural instrumentality of genre is related directly to the cultural and behavioural undercurrents that I have identified operating within and beneath the generic formations. What horror ‘does’, for example, is to blur boundaries, to confuse categories on which we base ideas of order and organization. Chapter Four identified the ways in which horror has enacted this confusion and destabilization through American, and international cinema since the early part of the twentieth century, drawing particular attention to notions of what horror is, and to what it does. The undercurrents in Australian horror narratives reveal a welling-up of questions relating to social organization. What horror in Australia *is*, is a closely related permutation of international horror genres. What it *does*, however, is something unique, and highly culturally specific. Thus I have attempted to align the cultural instrumentality of genre with the undercurrents I have established, in order to demonstrate the link between location and genre, and the implications thereof.

²² Films varying in style but indicative of this cycle include *Erskineville Kings* (White, 1997), *Praise* (Curran, 1997), *The Boys* (Woods, 1998), *The Bank* (Connolly, 2001), *Somersault* (Shortland, 2004), *Tom White* (Tsilimidos, 2004), *Little Fish* (Woods, 2005), and *Three Dollars* (Connolly, 2005).

Theorists, however, activate this cultural instrumentality of genre in different ways. Paul Hammond, for example, suggests that the subject matter of popular culture can only be mobilized ironically. He claims that “most miserable cinematic production [...] provides a fertile soil for the claim the image makes to its right to self-determination.”²³ He is speaking from the perspective of surrealist writing on cinema, adopting an “anti-bourgeois, anti-vanguard bias,” but the point emphasizes the importance of the genre film. The self-determination he writes of refers to the aspects of generic cinema, sitting close to the surface, that despite the weight of pressure from the discourse of cinema to maintain the social status-quo, reveal or deploy socio-cultural counter-tendencies, and creates the space for resistance. This space is variously located in the processes of film-making, of film analysis, and in the intertexts of popular cultural significance that are linked to the discourses of Australian cinema.

This kind of perspective though has not been prominent in Australian cinema. During the 1980s, or perhaps more accurately, the 10BA period, critical assessment of the clear divide in Australian Cinema between the ‘quality’ film and the formula film reached a point of great emphasis. Elizabeth Jacka writes:

Formula films are those which consciously emulate international genre models, such as horror, science fiction, youth movies, the occult, and which efface any obvious signs of Australian-ness of any concern with localisable indigenous social milieux or social issues.²⁴

For Jacka, the genre film at this time was marked by its lack of direct interest in uniquely Australian concerns. Jonathan Rayner has expressed the need for a positive

²³ Paul Hammond, “Off at a Tangent,” in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema*, ed. Paul Hammond (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 8-9.

²⁴ Elizabeth Jacka, “Critical Positions,” in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late 80s*, eds. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (North Ryde: AFTRS, 1988), 70.

critical appraisal of generic cinema in relation to national cinema, pointing out that the national *is* inherent in the generic, and that analysis of such is crucial. He writes:

...understanding the use made of specific genres and their tropes informs the examination of Australian filmmaking. The science fiction, horror and fantasy bases of the Gothic have been dismissed in the past as exploitative genres aimed at adolescent audiences. However, the Australian Gothic embodies a serious critique of establishment authority and raises objections to accepted and pervasive social forms. [...] Far from advocating conformity, demanding consistency or championing communality, the evolution of film genres represents a reinforcement of and parallel to the formulation of national identity.²⁵

Jacka hinted at the success of Australian generic incarnations, but only in specific formulations, after accounting for the successes and failure in the 1980s period. She writes (specifically referring to the *Mad Max* films):

... [the films] succeed because they cunningly interweave the most popular and violent forms of screen genre with elements of ‘indigenouness’ – all sorts of allusions to and sly play with the Australian accent, landscape, sense of humour, sense of moral values – and so achieve a resonance...²⁶

Jacka, in this instance, sees that the ‘indigenouness’ of the *Mad Max* series in fact heightens the cultural significance of the films, by taking existing generic conventions and unavoidably infusing them with cultural resonance by representing certain aspects of cultural specificity in the narrative. It is in this process of ‘localising’ genre productions that undercurrents of the kind I have been examining – the nodes of cultural and textual conversion – are generated. I have taken this passage from Jacka as it encapsulates a perspective that I suggest is absolutely crucial to understanding the cultural instrumentality of genre in Australian cinema. Rayner has further elaborated on this notion, in relation specifically to the horror film. He writes:

In this national cinematic ethos, in which conventional film genres are adopted, adapted, and hybridized and from which new indigenous genres evolve in self-reflexive ways, the horror film’s role, as a commercial genre imbued with a

²⁵ Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema*, 173-174.

²⁶ Elizabeth Jacka, “Critical Positions,” in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late 80s*, eds. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (North Ryde: AFTRS, 1988), 77.

specific cultural significance, requires an acknowledgment on equal terms with more “official” forms of filmmaking.²⁷

Local genre films generate social significance through the incorporation of, and play with, ‘indigenouness’, in the sense that both Rayner and Jacka have proposed.

Australian cinema is itself a genre, as much as it is a socio-cultural idea and an industry. Australian films display a range of family resemblances that mark their Australian-ness within the system of global cinema, and these resemblances are contextualized historically and socially; they are an anachronistic representation of sets of social and industrial practices that combine to form a different ‘picture’ at different times. Australian cinema can be viewed as part of global cinema in the same way that horror can be viewed as a part of Hollywood cinema. O’Regan suggests that “[f]ilms are vehicles of social exchange among agents and they define the social (cultural) bond among them by their circulation.”²⁸ Complex systems of cinema production, consumption and analysis form the bonds between intersections of style, genre, theme and form, and these intersections find articulation through genre cinema. The important point here is that Australian cinema is an outlet for uniquely Australian articulations of genre films. I want to suggest, through using Kuhn’s notion of the cultural instrumentality of genre, that the undercurrents I have established, are very close, but not equivalent to genre, and are the result of transposing and transplanting primarily American genres onto Australian soil.

Australian Genres and Australian Cinema

²⁷ Jonathan Rayner, ““Terror Australia”: Areas of Horror in the Australian Cinema,” in *Horror International*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 99.

²⁸ Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), 17.

The Screening Of Australia, Dermody and Jacka's pivotal volumes, identify and explicate a range of styles and phases in Australian cinema, and subsequent writing on Australian cinema owes a lot to this work. It is industrial and cultural in basis, covering the circumstances of production of Australian films, with equal emphasis placed on the narrative and stylistic constituents of those films. It is inevitable that this discussion of undercurrents, and of genre and genres in Australian cinema, leads to concerns about the Australian industry more generally. This is something I have no intention of delving into in detail, as it is not something I have intended this thesis to cover, but I must make some cursory remarks. Australian cinema is an aesthetic and financial battleground, yet it is hard to delineate any real trajectory in arguments concerning the 'health' of the Australian industry in this light, when the frames of reference for this kind of argument are hopelessly dirty, to use 's terminology once again.

Arguments surrounding the Australian industry, polarized in the 1970s, continue to be proposed and reiterated. In the 1980s Sam Rohdie argued that "...the State-produced ideology of a national film culture and national film art simply masks an economic reality [...] for which terms like 'national' make little sense."²⁹ Apparently in agreement, David Stratton writes about the development of the industry in the 1970s, during the so-called New Wave, and quotes Peter Weir as saying: "'We'll fail. We can't win. It's the pattern of all national industries. We're like a patient lying on a bed who looks alive, healthy, and wonders why he can't leave the hospital.'"³⁰ Weir's pessimism is relevant now, more than a quarter of a century later, but can be seen with

²⁹ Sam Rohdie, "The Australian State, A National Cinema," in *An Australian Film Reader* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985), 268.

³⁰ David Stratton, *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival* (London: Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1980), 293.

the benefit of hindsight to be much more positively instructive. The ‘condition’ of the Australian film industry will remain a matter for much scrutiny as long as there are issues of funding, and cultural relevance. Australian films will continue to struggle against the genre juggernaut of Hollywood. However, as is clear, in articulating Australian instances of genres, there is a very real potential to make commercial and cultural headway. Jonathan Rayner suggests that:

[t]he ‘internationalisation’ of Australian filmmaking has been achieved through a synthesis of American popular genres (the musical, the road movie) and Australian ones (the Gothic, the rite of passage) and the articulation of nationally-specific content (debates on multiculturalism, masculinity, authority and identity). Inevitably in such popular forms, the rationalisation of serious questions is simplified if not simplistic, optimistic if not utopian, but the treatment of pertinent contemporary issues by the national film industry in entertainment films with wide appeal represents an advance over the unadventurous recapitulation of colonial history.³¹

The cultural instrumentality of Australian genre cinema, which I have suggested is commensurate with the undercurrents of social critique that I have offered throughout this thesis, is an area of great potential for both creators and critics of Australian Cinema.

³¹ Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema*, 161.

Conclusion - Extraordinary Undercurrents



Visitors (Richard Franklin, 2003)

This project has an undercurrent of its own; a desire situated somewhere beneath the surface to understand more about how Australian cinema fits in to the cultural landscape of the nation. As an industry, as a cultural product, and as an aesthetic object, Australian cinema has confused and confounded attempts at totalizing encapsulation, and remains a site of much theoretical contestation. Underlying my own attempts to capture and pin down particular aspects of this critical and social discourse is the belief that cinema can disturb assumptions about the boundaries and categories on which conceptual judgments are based, highlighting the idea that many aspects of culture we take for granted are, in fact, neither immutable nor consistent. I have suggested throughout this project that cinema potentially questions the troublesome distinction between the socio-cultural environment within which we go about our everyday lives, and the assumptions on which we base that life. The groups of films I have investigated access cultural discourses that cut across the networks of social and political interaction, operating to deploy, and interpret, textual representations of myths, social organization, and the transgression of uncertain borders between textual and cultural categories. The result has been a perspective that identifies challenges to the social order contained within the mundane, and an aspect of doubt and questioning that is never divorced from its everyday context.

In making the closing remarks that are to follow, I must concede that this project has been, to an extent, an attempted taxonomy of the unquantifiable. The textual qualities to which I have referred, and the groups of films I have collated, are just as nebulous and varied as the cultural assumptions that they challenge. However, I have attempted to make my perspective one that stimulates engagement with the socio-cultural implications of the genre film, particularly within the context of a national cinema that

struggles for financial and cultural stability. I have engaged with some of the disparities between generic cinema and 'quality' cinema from a critical and textual perspective, in order to identify genre films as theoretically and culturally important.

A project like this must necessarily make certain concessions, and mobilize a focussed, and, as a result, limited theoretical vocabulary. In the main I have used theorists of Australian media and cultural studies to piece together my perspectives, at the expense of leaning more heavily on other potential explanatory theoretical frameworks. The primary analytical perspectives I have used have made it possible to engage with varied texts in a manner that extends work in Australian cultural studies and Australian cinema, by elaborating theoretical work dealing with predominantly local contexts, as opposed to developing an entirely new context for examination. This has the consequence, broadly speaking, of splitting the resources I have relied on into two distinct areas. Those portions of the dissertation informed by theorists of Australian culture operate in contrast to the use of international theorists of cinema and genre, whose positions are used to delineate generic formations. When deployed in a local context, these ideas about genre formulation construct the basis of asserting the 'indigenusness' of Australian generic cinema.

I commenced by using the horror genre to develop a sense of the way cinema functions as an inextricable part of its originating culture, and therefore unavoidably articulates aspects of social and cultural circumstances. It has been my intention to centralize the relationship between cinema and culture throughout, via notions of intertextuality and sites of discursive intersection. I have attempted to remain focussed on the idea that despite the problems associated with textual analysis, in terms of the

pitfalls of suggesting unmediated links between text and cultural ‘meanings’, there is necessarily a distinctly pragmatic aspect to examining cinema. There is of course, a great deal of theoretical ground in the spaces between culture, text, and individuals as subjects, and while my claims and arguments involve the way these entities are linked, this thesis has not been *about* those spaces, nor their philosophical underpinnings. My aim has not been to unravel the complexities of the systems of media communication, reception, and analysis in forming and perpetuating ‘culture’ as a system of social and political exchange. My interest has instead been to engage with the textual analysis of generic films within a system of filmmaking that has been resistant to such, and accordingly my coverage of the more complex theoretical concerns of the process of textual analysis is necessarily reductive.

In his introduction to a critical examination of reflectionist textual analysis, Toby Miller writes:

Whereas most contemporary cultural critics/textual analysts would reject any absolute relationship or correspondence - not least because of the productive nature of signification itself - it remains the case that textual commentary draws its legitimacy from the existence of a certain connection.¹

That this connection exists has been of greater importance to this dissertation than any attempt to develop and define its precise characteristics. Miller contends that textual analysis necessarily implicates certain kinds of subjectivity, and that the relationship between texts and subjectivities is a system of exchange that ‘constructs’ both. I have, in my analyses, attempted to be mindful of this relationship, while remaining equally mindful of films as an assemblage of industrial circumstances, textual qualities and subject positions.

¹ Toby Miller, *The Well-Tempered Self* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 49.

The thesis I have developed comes as a result of assembling a series of smaller arguments that share the same basic premises. I delineated the historical development of the horror genre, identifying the various trends in production cycles, and some of the primary ‘turning points’ in stylistic and thematic content, to illustrate the way horror cinema has functioned to question and challenge cultural contexts. This formulated a practical perspective on the relationship between artifact and culture, using notions of intertextuality, genre and transgression as cinematic ‘tools’. This has been basis of the context I suggested for addressing the relationship between cinema and culture, and the analysis this relationship provokes.

Running clearly through each section of this thesis is a series of questions that are reiterated in specific contexts commensurate with the style and genre of the texts within which they reside. I posed questions about national myths in Australia, in particular, through films engaging with representations of mythical Australian male identities. I suggested that myths articulating identity characteristics are enduring and insidious, and that the iterations of these myths are expressed in relation to representations of landscape. The way in which landscape and myth serve to conceal, naturalize and cleanse the misogyny and violence of characters in rural and colonial narratives² correlates with the way that the ideological location of the suburb functions to naturalize certain presumptions about social organization. Distinctly and recognisably Australian articulations of the tensions between people and locations bring concerns about identity to prominence in much the same fashion, despite the disparity in locations between categories. The repeated representation of failures by male characters to live up to the dictates of their environments, and the ruthless

² Naturalizing identity characteristics through landscape, and cleansing mythical utterances, are covered, respectively, by Graeme Turner, *National Fictions* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 35, and Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Granada Publishing, 1979), 143.

demands for submission made by those environments (and their inhabitants), serve to generate doubt about the link between myths of Australian identity, and characters who must interact with that identity. Essentially, the strong sense of duality in Australian locations, being both physical and ideological places, generates a failure through the inability of characters to successfully occupy both realms. Character failings are crucial to narrative motivations, as they position the individual as the textual site of social decay, establishing a very clear opposition between the individual and the systems of social organization.

I have demonstrated that local iterations of the horror and science fiction genres generate this uncertainty similarly. The tension between the reality of physical locations, and the desires for accommodation within an ideological scheme of belonging remain central to these generic films. Horror texts mobilize undercurrents of paranoia and uncertainty, particularly towards social systems that cannot be seen as either reliable or benevolent, while futility within the social framework against a backdrop of extraordinary happenings contextualizes many science fiction texts. Human dimensions and concerns are carried across from rural drama into urban social drama, and then equally into horror and science fiction films.

This emphasis on the human proportions of narrative situations is present in a different manner throughout almost all of the films this thesis has used. It appears alongside social uncertainty as a challenge, in varying degrees, to moral conventions. Ambivalence and ambiguity towards crime, and towards social systems, have been consistent in Australian cinema, and much of the thematic basis for this is the result of the conflation of outlaw myths with representations of the victimhood of the working

and lower classes in Australian fictions. Films dealing with crime, again, establish oppositions between the individual and systems of social organization.

All of these films, no matter how 'generic', find their national 'voice' through a process of localization, whereby predominantly international (Hollywood) modes of storytelling are made local through their articulation of Australian social and cultural characteristics. This localising effect results in undercurrents, that are evident in the threads of resemblance between texts. These threads are not necessarily linked to genre, but are very much a product of the cultural instrumentality of local generic productions.³ I have suggested a position that uses narrative and thematic undercurrents as a basis for critical uptake of generic productions in order to work through the friction between 'national' and generic forms. The opening sentence of an Australian Film Commission catalogue of expected releases for 2006 encapsulates this friction. It reads:

On the following pages you'll find genre flicks with their own unique spin, experimental works, historical dramas reflecting on Australia's past and serious cinema that delves into the big questions of love, life and death.⁴

This sentence seems to encapsulate every film I have mentioned, yet the oppositions it suggests are limiting. It seems that for the Australian Film Commission genre films are not 'serious' films, despite acknowledging their uniqueness. The probable intended inclusiveness and flippancy of these remarks betrays a more serious perspective of quality judgements.

³ Annette Kuhn, "Cultural Theory and Science Fiction Cinema", Introduction to *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 1.

⁴ *Australian Feature Films 2006*. (Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne: Australian Film Commission, 2006).

This project proposes that the links between characters and their landscapes, and as a result, their social contexts, are made meaningful through the intersection of localizing narrative elements and genre formations. Local social contexts act as an enabling force on generic formulas, producing cultural implications through Australian undercurrents that permeate those generic forms. I have suggested that many local genre films use Australia as a context, without being *about* Australia, and my analysis reveals the social and cultural concerns that lay beneath the surface of these films. Put simply, these generic texts do not, and cannot, efface their Australian-ness.

In drawing this project to a close, I am, thankfully, no closer to proving Australian cinema is dystopian. I have covered oppressive national myths and inequities between genders, significant and troubling uncertainties about social organization, a distinct lack of trust in conventional ‘standards’ of social and cultural behaviour, and the fear that transgression, and by association, resistance, is doomed to fail. These are feelings that have, generally speaking, been articulated by films that occupy the portion of Australian cinema output regarded largely as the economic necessity of the industry, as opposed to the cultural desire. The constantly changing network of ‘failure narratives’, are in fact a sign of the great successes in Australian generic cinema in articulating and critiquing the nation, as a place and as an idea. Undercurrents in genre cinema expose the darkest possibilities of the story where the narrative, out of a necessity to restore equilibrium, cannot. The localization of generic formulas results in a cultural instrumentality of ‘formula’ films that is a counter-weight to the economic concessions they make. I have asserted, directly and indirectly, throughout this project that the position a cultural artifact may occupy as a commodity does not

necessarily detract from its potential to engage with and critique culture. As the horror film seeks to usurp the tendency to balance, to return to equilibrium, so the genre film more widely operates as a paradox of cultural 'value'. The genre film is more than merely a result of economic necessity, and underestimating its importance to Australian national cinema is culturally (as well as industrially) a perilous mistake.

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